

"THE STORY OF OUR LIVES FROM YEAR TO YEAR"

ALL THE YEAR ROUND

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ALEXIA.

By ELEANOR C. PRICE,

Author of "Gerald."

CHAPTER XVI.

FOR the next two years Alexia's life knew a happiness that it had never known before—not even in those girlish days when she always had her own way, and rode to hounds, and ran wild in the fields, and was first in love with Charlie. Those days were not always quite happy. They were a little doubtful and restless; she was almost too free, too much left to her own instincts. The child was, in fact, neglected; and her position among the neighbours being not quite assured, it was only Charlie, and her own natural good sense, which kept her from becoming sensitive and morbid.

So I think that for some years, ever since she began to grow up, and to realise that the troubles of life were never far off, Alexia had been very lonely. She had never made friends with other girls, except on the surface. Her father was a great deal to her, but he could not be everything; and her mother's death had taken away her only chance of the one thing she wanted: the sympathy of an older woman, who could love and understand and guide her. That want had betrayed itself once, and to Mrs. Melville, the only creature Alexia knew who could satisfy it. It was not entirely as Charlie's mother that Alexia laid her head on her knees with passionate sobs that day; and Mrs. Melville had known that very well. She was deeply touched, and could have given Alexia all she wanted, if the heavy chains of circumstance had not bound her too hard and fast.

In her childish days Alexia had always

shrunk from Mrs. Melville, who certainly had never attempted to take much notice of her.

Charlie's mother was a person to be dreaded; she was very grand and worldly, and did not care for him. He and Alex enjoyed themselves much more when she was out of the way. It was very natural. Mrs. Melville was a woman of the world—fashionable, full of ambitions, plagued with the want of money, completely occupied with her own and her eldest son's affairs. It was not likely that she would have more than a word now and then to spare for a poor little country girl like William Page's daughter. She was never unkind, for she liked Alexia's mother, and was sorry for her; but of course Alexia herself had not interested her at all, till the dreadful discovery that Charlie meant to marry her. Then at last she was obliged to realise the girl, and then she found out her beauty, high spirit, and character. Her interest in Alexia dated from that day; and, strangely enough, Alexia's attraction towards her began then too.

There were, of course, many people whom Mrs. Melville called her friends; but, for all that, she was a lonely woman, and, after Charlie's marriage, a disappointed one too. Under the surface of her nature she had a great deal of nobleness, sincerity, and goodness; her ambitions for Charlie had not been low ones, and were not satisfied by seeing him a rich man. She had her dreams of a life that was really worth living, and she knew too in her heart what sort of things made life worth having. She knew, in spite of all her early training and practice, in spite of all the sneers of the world and the good sense of the majority, that love, and truth, and greatness of mind were things for which a man might give himself and all he had, and never repent of the bargain.

Now, during the next two years, while Charlie was on the other side of the world, Alexia spent a great deal of time with Mrs. Melville, and a friendship grew up between them, as perfect as their position would allow. Mrs. Melville sometimes came to Redwood, but more often Alexia paid her long visits in London, where she learned to know many things and many people. Mrs. Melville watched a little anxiously at first for the effect of society upon Alexia, but she soon saw that her favourite child was not to be spoilt; that while her manners developed, her character did not change, and that the admiration attracted by her beauty and freshness would never do her any harm. Twice in those two years Mrs. Melville persuaded Mr. Page to let her take Alexia abroad, and all her own first enjoyment of everything came back in sympathy.

Charlie wrote to his mother very seldom; and, when his letters came, she never read them to Alexia, but was generally a little graver than usual for a day or two, and yet more affectionate. But at those times Alexia always felt as if the tie that bound her to Mrs. Melville was in some strange way a division too—as if they were held together by a bar, that would neither let them be near each other nor far off. Charlie, the subject most deeply interesting to them both, was the one subject they avoided, for they could not be quite frank with each other. Alexia had in fact no wish to disturb the half mysterious peace that reigned in her life now, and Mrs. Melville was far too wise, whatever her thoughts might be, not to leave the future to itself.

The ivy grew fresh and green over the blackened walls of the old Manor, for the rebuilding was left till the Squire's return, except what was necessary to keep the walls standing. The place was lonely and sad, and it was no wonder that Mrs. Melville did not care to be there much.

But in the third spring she seemed to change her mind, and came down for some weeks, and was very busy putting the place in order. The lawns and shrubberies began to get back something of their old civilised beauty, and the beds in the garden were bright once more. Alexia thought she had never seen the garden looking prettier than it did one afternoon in May, when she came to see Mrs. Melville, and found her walking up and down the long flowery space between the great dark yew hedge and the red walls where magnolias and clematis flourished. The old soft turf was

studded with patches of brilliant colour. A crowd of white tulips rose out of a thick bed of blue forget-me-nots; close by red tulips lifted their bright heads from a deep setting of some small purple flower, and so on all along the garden—a bright mosaic painted by Mrs. Melville's fancy. She was walking there with a letter in her hand, which she put into her pocket when she saw Alexia coming from the dark arch in the yew hedge, crossing the shadow into the still sheltered sunshine of the garden—for this May day was a day of the poets.

Alexia looked very happy and young. She was dressed in pink, which always became her; her eyes were smiling, and her curls clustered softly under her round straw hat.

"Did you want me?" said Alexia, for Mrs. Melville had sent for her. "But I'm afraid I must go back to tea, please, because I have asked Mrs. Dodd to come."

"I'm sorry. Yes, I wanted you very much. Poor Mrs. Dodd! she is rather in the way sometimes," said Mrs. Melville a little absently.

"I did not think I could put her off," said Alexia, looking at her anxiously.

"No, no; of course not. That would have been wrong," said Mrs. Melville. "It doesn't matter." And she put her hand in Alexia's arm, and walked on slowly past the tulip beds.

"I think they get lovelier every day," said Alexia.

"What? Oh yes," said Mrs. Melville. "And the blue sky is so beautiful, and the fresh green leaves, and the sunshine. Poor Mrs. Dodd! She doesn't matter at all, Alexia, to you and me. Does she, darling?" And Mrs. Melville turned round and kissed Alexia, who knew at that moment, she could not tell how, that something perfectly wonderful was on the edge of happening. "My dear, I have something to tell you," her friend's voice went on. "I had a letter to-day from Charlie. He is in England—in London. He has arrived three weeks sooner than I expected him."

She stopped, and Alexia murmured something like "I didn't know."

"I kept his plans to myself," said Mrs. Melville, "because I thought they were so very uncertain. But he seems to be quite decided now—at least, Alexia, he does not quite know whether he is to come down here to-morrow, or whether I shall go up to him."

Again she was silent. Alexia felt horribly ashamed of herself. What business had

she to feel that all her thoughts were escaping from her own control, and that she really could not speak in her natural voice, because of these facts that Mrs. Melville had told her? How could they concern her? With crimson cheeks and a violent struggle she said rather abruptly: "What are you going to do?"

For a moment Mrs. Melville did not answer; they walked on silently. Then she said, very gravely and sweetly, "My dear, it is you who must decide. Charlie says I am to tell you that it depends on you."

Alexia stood still on the grass, Mrs. Melville watching her, while she gazed down at the white tulips and forget-me-nots. Her confusion and excitement had suddenly passed away; the happiness was too perfect for any doubt or fear now. Only after a minute she slowly lifted her eyes and looked at Mrs. Melville to have her only question answered. "Do *you* mind?"

"Don't be cruel, Alexia. You know I love you," said Mrs. Melville, her voice trembling a little as she stooped and kissed her.

CHAPTER XVII.

AFTER a long time, as the hours went on, Alexia and Mrs. Melville both remembered Mrs. Dodd. To Alexia the recollection came with an almost comical shock. Poor Mrs. Dodd! She would hardly be made to believe now that she had not been right all along; but what did that or anything else matter?

"I ought to go home now," Alexia said. "I wish—I wonder if you would go with me!"

"I will, my dear," said Mrs. Melville, who was almost as happy as Alexia. "In fact, I was going to ask myself, for I don't feel inclined to let you out of my sight."

It certainly was hard to have to sit down quietly and pour out tea, and talk reasonably on parish matters to Mrs. Dodd, when the thought of to-morrow, like some dazzling vision, would fill all one's mind and sight; when one could hardly feel the ground under one's feet, or understand what other people said, or realise that life to everybody else was still the old colourless humdrum thing it had been to one's self for so many years past.

Alexia longed to run away to her own room and be alone, and try to think what it really was that Mrs. Melville had told

her. But she had to sit still and behave properly while her good angel talked to Mrs. Dodd, who was delighted to meet her, as she wished to consult her about a woman who *would* let her children go in rags.

Alexia tried to join in a little, but she could not take the subject seriously, and made one or two nonsensical remarks, and went off into a wild little fit of laughter. Mrs. Dodd looked surprised, and Mrs. Melville's lips trembled; she gave Alexia one glance, and said:

"Alexia, we really don't want your opinion, for you know nothing about it."

Then she turned to Mrs. Dodd again and went on talking seriously.

Ever since their grand quarrel, more than two years ago, Mrs. Dodd and Alexia had been on the most polite terms. By her father's wish Alexia had gone to Mrs. Dodd the day after that quarrel, and had told her she was sorry for having lost her temper. Mrs. Dodd, who was an honest woman, had at once apologised for her part in the business, and confessed that what she said was founded on a mistake. Since then they had avoided each other as much as possible, but had felt a certain mutual respect, though Mrs. Dodd thought aloud in private that it was a great pity Mrs. Melville made such a fool of the girl.

Presently Alexia left her tea-table, for she was really too restless to sit still. She wondered where her father was, and how she should tell him. She went to the window and stood there, looking across the garden, seeing nothing, hearing nothing of the talk in the room, only conscious that a nightingale in the great lilac-bush was singing with a sweetness that was almost agony.

Then she heard another sound, which somehow she seemed to have expected all the time—the click of the opening gate. It opened and swung back again, and Charlie came in. Then she heard the nightingale no more, but only his footsteps as he came along to the door. She did not speak or move, except that she drew back a step from the window without knowing it. But in a kind of bewildering dream she watched him, hardly conscious that there was no pain now—no pain in seeing him, for the first time for more than six years. She could not turn round or speak to Mrs. Melville, who little knew how near he was—Charlie, the sunburnt traveller, walking with quick eager steps, looking thoughtfully on the ground.

Just before he reached the door he

looked up once at the window, and caught sight of Alexia as she stood there. Then, like the impatient man he was, he walked straight into the house, along the well-known old passage, and in at the drawing-room door. Even then Alexia did not speak or move, but only stood in a dream, looking at him.

Mrs. Melville started from her chair, and Mrs. Dodd screamed, but Charlie did not see either of them, or perhaps he was too impatient to care for a dozen spectators. He came straight up to Alexia and caught both her hands, and said:

"Alex, have I waited long enough?" and then he was holding her passionately close in his arms, whispering, "At last!" while he kissed her; and poor little Alexia in this intense happiness lost all her self-control, and broke into a storm of sudden tears.

Mrs. Melville's eyes were full of tears too, and for the first minute she said nothing. Mrs. Dodd got up, and after staring wildly at those two in the window, turned helplessly to her.

"I had no idea—I think I had better go," she said under her breath.

"Well, suppose you and I leave them for a minute," murmured Mrs. Melville, beginning to smile, and she very gently drove Mrs. Dodd before her into the hall.

Mrs. Dodd was quite flushed and trembling with excitement. At such a moment she forgot all her principles, her prejudices of years, all that she really thought unbecoming and undesirable in such a state of things. These feelings were sure to return to her afterwards in cold blood, but just now, being at heart a woman like the rest of us, she was carried away, and felt nothing but astonishment and sympathy.

"Mrs. Melville, I assure you—I really had no idea——" she stammered out. "So very sorry—so glad, I mean—I did not even know that Mr. Melville was in England."

"He landed yesterday," said Charlie's mother. "I did not expect him here till to-morrow, so I am as much surprised as you are. Not at that—I knew about that, of course."

"Well—well, I am sure I hope she will be worthy of such great good fortune."

"I hope we shall be able to make her happy," said Mrs. Melville quietly. "You won't mind my asking you—don't tell anybody at present, except Mr. Dodd."

This Mrs. Dodd promised with much

earnestness, and then, to Mrs. Melville's great relief, she went away.

Near the gate, as she was rushing along with a very red face, already beginning to realise all the consequences, she met Mr. Page. He would have stopped to speak to her, but she waved her hand impatiently.

"Go in, go in!" she cried. "Wonderful things have happened," and she hurried on her way.

He looked after her in amazement. Her manner was so strange that it flashed across his mind—"Another quarrel with Alex:" but after all he thought not, and so took her advice and went in.

Mrs. Melville had by this time gone back into the drawing-room, and was sitting on the sofa with Alexia's hand in hers. Alexia was comforted now, and had torn herself away from Charlie to fly to his mother. He was standing on the rug, talking very fast; but when Mr. Page came in he stopped, and went forward to meet him, holding out his hand.

"I'm not half good enough for her," he said, "but will you give me Alex now?"

Alex herself got up and went to her father too, taking hold of his arm with both hands, and leaning her face against his shoulder, as she had often done in hours of trouble. He put his arm round her, turning very pale, and for a moment did not give his hand to Charlie. He looked at him hard, and then down to Alexia's hidden eyes, and then across to Mrs. Melville, who met his glance with the smile that he used to say would take her to heaven.

Somehow, just then, he felt as he had never felt before, even when her wedding seemed to be so near, that the time was come when he must lose his little Alex. She was really giving herself away now; there was no doubt now; she belonged no more to him, but to Charlie, who stood there waiting for her, with lines on his face written by many troubles and climates. He was a good fellow after all. Mr. Page told himself that he knew that: the man who was thought rough by his acquaintances would never be rough to Alexia.

Her father's arm tightened round her a little, and he stooped and touched her curls with his lips.

"Very well, Charlie," he said, giving him his hand, and smiling a little. "I don't know about goodness, but you'll be good to her."

This is only a sketch of a few years in a

girl's life, and there is no need to carry it on any further. Alexia and Charlie were of course meant for each other from the beginning; they were lovers always, and I shall be surprised if they do not continue lovers to the end. They were neither of them faultless, and both made mistakes in their lives, which might very easily have ruined them for ever. If Charlie's first wife had lived, the stream down which he was slowly drifting might have dashed him at last among rapids and waterfalls, without strength or heart or conscience to struggle. If Alexia had married Edmund, her nature would have starved on the humdrum machinery of life, even flavoured with quotations. But I think she would still have walked in the light, for she was stronger than Charlie; her young soul was pure and high, and never felt anything but horror of darkness. Of course, she would have gone through the Inferno itself to save him, but that is another story. She went through something not unlike it to save the humming-birds, and strangely, by that wild impulse, saved herself instead.

SOME FAMOUS PLAYS.

IV.

SHERIDAN'S "RIVALS" AND "SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL."

IN TWO PARTS. PART II.

A FEW months previous to his marriage Sheridan had been entered as a student of the Middle Temple, but now neither time nor money necessary to the pursuit of his profession was at his disposal. His father had declined to countenance his union, and refused him future help; and Richard, declining to make use of his wife's talents for their common support, had determinedly rejected profitable engagements offered her.* His objections to her

* In this determination, which satisfied his pride and saved her from continual temptations, he earned the approval of Dr. Johnson. "We talked," says Boswell, "of a young gentleman's marriage with an eminent singer, and his determination that she should no longer sing in public, though his father was very earnest she should, because her talents would be liberally rewarded, so as to make her a good fortune. It was questioned whether the young gentleman, who had not a shilling in the world, but was blest with very uncommon talents, was not foolishly delicate, or foolishly proud, and his father truly rational, without being mean. Johnson, with all the high spirit of a Roman senator, exclaimed: 'He resolved wisely and nobly, to be sure. He is a brave man. Would not a gentleman be disgraced by having his wife sing publicly for hire? No, sir, there can be no doubt here. I know not if I should not prepare myself for a public singer as readily as let my wife be one.'" The happy change in public opinion since this sentence was delivered, is worthy of note.

appearing as a professional singer were exceedingly strong. She having before their marriage made an agreement to sing at the Worcester Musical Meeting, Sheridan, after great pressure from the directors, permitted her to fulfil her promise, but gave her salary to public charities; and once more he allowed her to sing at the ceremony of Lord North's installation as Chancellor of Oxford, "merely to oblige his Lordship and the University." Nay, so anxious was he that her profession should be forgotten, that he discouraged the exhibition of her talent in private assemblies. Northcote records how Sir Joshua Reynolds invited the Sheridans, soon after their marriage, to one of his famous dinners, together with a large number of guests, in hopes that she would gratify them by her singing. That she might have a suitable accompaniment he hired a full-toned piano. But to his great mortification, "on hints being given that a song from her would be received as a gratification and favour, Mr. Sheridan answered that Mrs. Sheridan, with his assent, had come to a resolution never again to sing in company. Sir Joshua repeated this next day," says Northcote, "in my hearing with some degree of anger, saying, 'What reason could they think I had to invite them to dinner, unless it was to hear her sing, for she cannot talk!'"

The young couple began life on part of the fortune settled on Mrs. Sheridan by Long. Meanwhile, her husband strove to earn an income by writing for journals and magazines, in which occupation he was occasionally aided by his wife, who had given proof of her literary talent by turning sentimental verses, and inditing pretty letters. "We are obliged," he told one of his friends, "to write for our daily leg of mutton, otherwise we should have no dinner."

"Ah!" replied his confidant, "I perceive it is a joint affair."

In the year succeeding that of his marriage he was engaged on a book, of which no trace has been discovered, and on a comedy subsequently known as *The Rivals*. "I have done it," he says, writing of the play to his father-in-law, "at Mr. Harris's (the manager's) own request; it is now complete in his hands and preparing for the stage. He, and some of his friends also who have heard it, assure me in the most flattering terms that there is not a doubt of its success. It will be very well played, and Harris tells me that the

least shilling I shall get—if it succeeds—will be £600. I shall make no secret of it towards the time of representation, that it may not lose any support my friends can give it. I had not written a line of it two months ago, except a scene or two, which I believe you have seen in an odd act of a little farce."

The Rivals was first produced on the 17th of January, 1775. Shuter, Woodward, Lewis, Quick, and Lee, respectively playing the parts of Sir Anthony Absolute, Captain Absolute, Falkland, Bob Acres, and Sir Lucius O'Trigger. John Bernard, an actor of repute and experience, has, in his "Retrospection of the Stage," given his impressions of the first night's representation. "It was so intolerably long, and so decidedly opposed in its composition to the taste of the day," he writes, "as to draw down a degree of censure, which convinced me on quitting the house that it would never succeed. It must be remembered that this was the English 'age of sentiment,' and that Cumberland and Hugh Kelly had flooded the stage with moral poems under the title of comedies, which took their views of life from the drawing-room exclusively, and coloured their characters with a nauseous French affectation. The Rivals, in my opinion, was a decided attempt to overthrow this taste, and follow up the blow which Goldsmith had given in *She Stoops to Conquer*. My recollection of the manner in which the former was received bears me out in the supposition. The audience on this occasion were composed of two parties—those who supported the prevailing taste, and those who were indifferent to it, and liked nature. On the first night of a new play it was very natural that the former should predominate, and what was the consequence? why, that Falkland and Julia—which Sheridan had obviously introduced to conciliate the sentimentalists, but which in the present day are considered heavy incumbrances—were the characters which were most favourably received, whilst Sir Anthony, Acres, and Lydia, those faithful and diversified pictures of life, were barely tolerated, and Mrs. Malaprop was singled out for peculiar vengeance."

After its second representation the comedy was withdrawn. Its failure was chiefly attributed to the bad acting of Lee as Sir Lucius; and, his part having been given to Clinch, and some alterations effected in the dialogue, it was again performed, and gradually rose into favour with the town.

Towards the end of the year 1775, Sheridan produced a comic opera entitled *The Duenna*, a light, brilliant offspring of his genius, plentifully interspersed with sprightly airs by Linley, one of which at least, "Had I a heart for falsehood framed," is not wholly unknown to the present generation. The *Duenna* became immediately popular, and succeeded in running twelve nights longer than *The Beggar's Opera*. Fortune indeed now smiled on Sheridan, for before another year had passed he, at the age of twenty-five, became part manager and proprietor of Drury Lane Theatre.

This important step had been brought about by Garrick, who, having achieved a fame such as no actor had previously earned, and accumulated a fortune proportionate to his success, resolved on retiring from the stage, withdrawing from management, and selling his moiety in the patent of Drury Lane Playhouse. Rumour of this intention having spread through the town, Garrick was beset by numbers anxious to purchase his share, which amounted to £35,000; but the manager, having first tendered it to Colman, of Covent Garden, next offered it to Sheridan, who, in conjunction with Linley and Dr. Ford, was desirous of acquiring the property. The sum of £35,000 was considerable to the future shareholders; "but, I think," writes the young dramatist to his father-in-law, "we might safely give £5,000 more on this purchase than richer people. The whole is valued at £70,000; the annual interest is £3,500; while this is cleared the proprietors are safe, but I think it must be infernal management indeed that does not double it." And again, he hopefully tells Linley, "I'll answer for it we shall see many golden campaigns."

In June, 1776, the sale of Garrick's share was duly effected. Sheridan and Linley paid £10,000 each, Dr. Ford £15,000, and the brilliant young playwright in a little while became directing manager. Lacy, who had been Garrick's partner, and still held his share of £35,000, was in Sheridan's opinion "utterly unequal to any department in the theatre. He has an opinion of me," he continues, "and is very willing to let the whole burden and responsibility be taken off his shoulders. But I certainly should not give up my time and labour—for his superior advantage, having so much greater a share—without some exclusive advantage. Yet I should by no means make the demand till I had shown myself equal to the task."

In February, 1777, the new manager produced a comedy, *A Trip to Scarborough*, which was merely an alteration from *The Relapse*, by Vanbrugh, and then set to work in writing *The School for Scandal*. The composition of this famous play, apparently the issue of happy chance and unpremeditated wit, was the patient result of untiring industry. Two distinct sketches of the comedy were first made, which, after consideration and trial, developed into one perfect whole. In the first outline, Lady Sneerwell and her slanderous associates, her ward Maria, and a sentimental young gentleman named Clerimont, are the chief characters; in the second, Oliver Teazle, a retired merchant, his wife, and Plausible and Pliable—the originals of Joseph and Charles Surface—are the principal personages. The sparkling repartee of the first, and the motive of the second, combined to present the most brilliant picture of eighteenth-century society known to the stage.

Evidence remains, in his manuscripts, of the care Sheridan devoted to the construction of his sentences, and the labour he underwent in setting forth his humour to the best advantage. Repeatedly he expressed one idea in various forms, by way of ascertaining its most effective use, and he continually refined his wit till it shone with brighter lustre in each new setting. And, as he toiled, so did he triumph. Involved meanings, over-glaring witticisms, cumbrous sentences, were simplified, softened, and curtailed, as he proceeded. The time occupied in polishing the comedy was greater than he had anticipated, and, the piece being announced for performance before it was finished, the last scenes were roughly scribbled on detached pieces of paper. Towards the close his work evidently became irksome to the author, who, coming to a conclusion, wrote after the final words: "Finished at last. Thank God. R. B. Sheridan." To which the prompter, no less grateful, added, "Amen. A. Hopkins."

The comedy being announced, the town awaited its representation with interest. Garrick had diverted his elegant leisure by reading it with close attention, and, as Arthur Murphy records, had spoken of it with the highest approbation in all companies, a compliment the author fully appreciated. Between them a kindly friendship had been established. Tom Davies says that Sheridan esteemed and loved Garrick, "knew the value of his advice, and im-

plicitly relied upon his experience and discernment." On the other hand, the great actor paid Sheridan the loftiest compliment possible by placing him on a mental level with himself; for, when one of Garrick's admirers regretted that the Atlas who had long propped the stage, had left his station, the late manager replied, "If that be the case he has found another young Hercules to fulfil the office."

Anxious for Sheridan's success Garrick daily attended the rehearsals, to which he brought the benefit of his exact judgment and skilled experience. Moreover, he wrote a long prologue for the comedy, a form of composition in which he excelled. The newspaper advertisements announced the play as "never before performed," but made no mention of the author's name; and the preliminary notices declared the comedy "would be ornamented with scenes which did honour to the painters, and furnished with dresses new and elegant."

At length the evening of May 8th, 1777, the date fixed for first performance of the comedy, arrived. The doors of Drury Lane Playhouse opened at half-past five o'clock, and, before an hour passed, "a brilliant and crowded audience," to borrow a phrase from *The Public Advertiser*, had assembled. In due time, the curtain rising, King came forward to speak Garrick's prologue, which, with much pleasantry, "adverted to the title of the play and shot an arrow of pointed satire at the too general proneness to distraction observable in the daily and evening papers." Then the comedy began, and a play of wit, exchange of repartee, and charm of diction flashed on the hearers with surprise and delight. "The loudest testimonies of applause," the *London Evening Post* of the following day states, "greeted the comedy between every act"; and the *Daily Advertiser* adds: "it was received with the highest marks of universal approbation." The full force of enthusiastic approval was reserved for the screen scene in the fourth act, which, according to the *Public Advertiser*, "produced a burst of applause beyond anything ever heard perhaps in a theatre." A further testimony of the sensation this scene caused is recorded by Frederick Reynolds, the dramatist, in his "Life and Times." On this night he was returning from Lincoln's Inn about nine o'clock, "and passing through the pit passage from Vinegar Yard to Brydges Street," he writes, "I heard such a tremendous noise

over my head, that, fearing the theatre was proceeding to fall about it, I ran for my life, but found the next morning that the noise did not arise from the falling of the house, but from the falling of the screen in the fourth act, so violent and so tumultuous were the applause and laughter."

Owing to frequent rehearsals, and the care exercised by Sheridan, the acting on the first night was unusually good, and largely helped to secure success for the play. Mrs. Abington, as Lady Teazle, exhibited grace and vivacity. Smith's playing of Charles Surface, and King's representation of Sir Peter Teazle, were pronounced admirable. The remainder of the company were almost equally excellent. "To my great surprise," writes Horace Walpole, who witnessed it some nights later, "there were more parts performed admirably in this comedy than I almost ever saw in any play. Mrs. Abington was equal to the first in her profession; Yates, Parsons, Miss Pope, and Palmer all shone." Yates played Sir Oliver; Parsons, Crabtree; Miss Pope, Mrs. Candour; and Palmer, Joseph Surface.

The curtain fell, at the close of the first performance, on a scene of enthusiasm such as the walls of Old Drury had seldom witnessed, and, before morning dawned, the happy playwright, then in his twenty-sixth year, was, as he told Lord Byron many years later, "knocked down, and put into the watch-house, for making a row in the street and being found intoxicated by the watchmen." Next day the London press expressed its admiration of the brilliant comedy. The Public Advertiser was of opinion that Sheridan had united in one piece the easy dialogue of Cibber, the humour and truth of Vanbrugh, with the refined wit and pleasantry of Congreve. The Gazetteer pronounced that his genius "had happily restored the English drama to those rays of glory of which it was being shorn by a tedious set of contemptible scribblers." The Morning Chronicle declared the dialogue of his comedy to be "easy, engaging, and witty, abounding in strokes of pointed satire and enriched by a vein of humour pervading the whole." The objections it pointed out were that the production was somewhat too long, the scandal scenes were overcharged, and the last act was hastily composed. The Morning Post alone hit the sole blemish of this well-nigh faultless play. "If," says this journal, "there is a part that the pen of criticism

can justly point out as exceptionable, it will be found in the second act, where, in our opinion, the business of the piece is suffered to hang in compliment to a chain of wit traps, some of which seem rather too studiously laid to have the desired effect."

Sheridan had now secured the reputation of having written the most brilliant comedy in our language. He has since earned the gratitude of countless numbers for the gratification it has afforded them. Its success continued at full tide during the remainder of the season, and was received with renewed enthusiasm in the autumn. Indeed, its continued representation for the next two years, whilst powerless to lessen its own popularity, was detrimental to the success of later productions, as may be surmised from the following remark, written by the treasurer of Drury Lane in his official report of the receipts for 1789: "School for Scandal damped the new pieces."

Before this date it was played in Dublin, Edinburgh, Bath, and many of the larger towns in England, and was everywhere received with hearty approbation. In 1788 the screen and auction scenes were embodied in a piece called *Les Deux Neveux*, played with success in Paris, and later on it was produced at the Théâtre Français, under the title *Le Tartuffe des Mœurs*, and at the Porte St. Martin as *L'Ecole du Scandale*. A version of the comedy was produced in Vienna by Schröder, an actor and author of repute, who travelled to England for the purpose of seeing it performed; and it has also been played in the Hague.

It was not until some years after Sheridan's death, that one of his biographers ventured to insinuate that the comedy had been pirated from a nameless young lady, the daughter of a merchant in Thames Street, who, obligingly dying of consumption, left Sheridan in possession of her manuscripts. "While time rolls on," says Dr. Watkins, in a fine spirit of false prophecy, "the difficulty of settling this question must necessarily be increasing, and this, in all probability, will be one of those critical points about which the spirit of literary research will labour in vain." The ball which this foolish doctor of laws sought to set rolling was timely stopped. Even if *The Rivals*, *The Duenna*, and later on *The Critic*, did not claim *The School for Scandal* as kindred, Sheridan's original sketches of the comedy happily remained to prove the worthlessness of this ingenious aspersion.

DREAMING.

I DREAMED as I slept last night,
And because the wild wind blew;
And because the plash of the angry rain,
Fell heavily on the window pane,
I heard in my dream the sob of the main,
On the seaboard that I knew.

I dreamed as I slept last night.
And because the oaks outside
Swayed and groaned to the rushing blast,
I heard the crash of the stricken mast,
And the wailing shriek as the gale swept past,
And cordage and sail replied.

I dreamed as I slept last night.
And because my heart was there,
I saw where the stars shone large and bright,
And the heather budded upon the height,
With the Cross above it standing white;
My dream was very fair.

I dreamed as I slept last night.
And because of its charm for me,
The inland voices had power to tell,
Of the sights and the sounds I love so well,
And they wrapt my fancy in the spell,
Wove only by the sea.

STUDIES OF OVER THE WAY.

A HOUSE IN CHARLOTTE STREET.

ON a certain occasion, when I was searching for a new abode, a friend told me incidentally that Charlotte Street, Fitzroy Square, was much affected by artists. Just then we had been suffering from an unusually severe course of fogs, and I was anxious above everything to get into a clearer air. Artists, said I to myself, would never congregate about Fitzroy Square unless it were comparatively free from fog. So to Fitzroy Square I took my household gods, only to learn that artists, like other men, are prone to err; for a more foggy district than that to which I had migrated I never lived in.

As I had artists all round me, it was not wonderful that I should have one for my "over the way." He was a tall, dark, sombre-featured young man, who might very well have had a drop of Spanish blood in his veins; and his wife, though without any striking beauty, was a sweet-faced little woman, a mere child, and evidently passionately in love with her husband. They occupied the first floor front-room; so I was able to command a good view of their movements from my post of observation—the window of my sitting-room on the second floor. The young man worked every day as long as the light held out; and then he and his little wife would issue forth, and when they came back from their walk he would generally be carrying a paper parcel, which I ventured to assume contained most likely some inexpensive

delicacy for the tea-table. My neighbours were poor, there was no doubt about that, but they were certainly very happy. The husband's grave face would light up in listening to his wife's cheery prattle; and she, clinging to his arm and looking up in his face, seemed to call upon all the street to look at her happiness and to confirm her judgment that her husband was the finest fellow in all creation.

As the spring days lengthened out, my neighbour's hours of labour lengthened also. He made the most of every minute of light, and I noticed that he began to look pale from overwork. I could see him, as he sat before his canvas—a somewhat large one—and his wife, more often than not, would be sitting near him and reading aloud. At last there arrived one day a large gilt frame, so I concluded that the picture was finished. A few days afterwards a four-wheeled cab was summoned, and the picture with some difficulty was got inside. The painter mounted the box beside the cabman, and away they went. For the next three weeks or a month my friend took life much easier. From the domestic details which I observed I had reason to believe that breakfast over the way was rarely finished before eleven, and the painter spent much of his time looking out of the window, pipe in mouth. He was troubled with very few visitors, but in these leisure days I noticed that a tall man with a limping walk called nearly every day. He generally stopped an hour or more, and once I noticed him standing before a sketch of my neighbour's and seemingly criticising it, so I concluded that he was a brother artist.

One morning I saw the painter leave the house with a downcast air. He slammed the door violently behind him, and a look of mingled rage and despair sat upon his face. After an hour or two a cab drove up to the door. The painter descended from the box, and, with the cabman's help, dragged a large picture out of the cab and took it into the house.

For a month after this occurrence the house was almost a blank. I scarcely ever saw the painter or his wife. The former would sometimes come to the window, and gaze into the street with a look of weary despair upon his face. The tall man, too, discontinued his visits. At last he appeared again, and this time he stopped nearly the whole afternoon. He must have been the bearer of good news, for the painter seemed quite himself again on the

morrow. He set to work at his easel. At first I missed the figure of the little wife with her book open beside him; but my binocular soon informed me that she was seated before him on the platform, evidently posed for her portrait.

He worked with all his old energy for a fortnight or so, till the portrait was done. Then it was brought forward and placed in the window, so that I could easily get a view of it; and though I could see that it was a good likeness, I could see equally that it failed to display the principal charm of the sweet young face it represented. The look of youthful innocence was wanting. In a day or two's time a handsome carriage drove up to the door, and a magnificently attired lady descended and went into the house. I could see her moving about in the room, criticising the picture from all points of view. The painter's face was all aglow with pride and admiration of his work as he did the honours; but the little wife came up to the window—I had not seen her so plainly for weeks—and looked out with very sad and hopeless eyes, and I fancied I could mark the traces of recent tears upon her pretty cheeks. The fine lady drove away, but very soon she returned, and a tall, handsome man with her, whom I judged to be her husband, and, on taking a comprehensive view of the studio, I discovered her seated on the platform, while the painter was sketching out her features on a new canvas.

I felt genuine pleasure that my neighbour had at last gained a foothold on the ladder of fame; the only bitter drop was the blank woe-begone face of the young wife as she gazed out of the window, or trotted out—alone now—on her house-keeping errands. Often during the sittings I marked the tall, handsome gentleman talking to her on the other side of the studio.

As soon as the lady departed, the painter invariably removed the canvas from the easel and put in its place the portrait of his wife. Then he would sit down in front of this and gaze at it motionless in silent admiration. Once I noticed that he started angrily from his seat, and a second glance showed me that his wife had thrown a cloth over her portrait, and hidden it from his sight.

This little episode, I confess, puzzled me considerably. I was in full course to construct a theory of love and jealousy. The painter had fallen in love with his fair sitter, and the poor young wife's woe-begone face was an index of her jealous

torment; but this could hardly be maintained when the artist seemed to long to get rid of the sitter, so that he might gaze in rapture at his wife's portrait. Was he jealous of the tall, handsome gentleman? I saw nothing to justify such a conclusion. He rarely left the house; for, when the last vestige of daylight had faded, instead of going out as heretofore, with his wife on his arm, he would sit down before her portrait and keep his eyes steadily fixed upon it. He even forgot to light his pipe. The lame man, whom I had not seen for a long time, now recommenced his visits. He came much oftener than before, but the painter never went out with him.

Soon other carriages drove up to the door. My neighbour had evidently become a fashionable portrait-painter all at once, for one lady would come on Mondays and Thursdays, and another on Tuesdays and Fridays. I noticed that whenever any lady came for the first time he would always exhibit to her his wife's portrait, now placed on a handsome easel and draped with velvet in the most favourable light.

One day the lame man called, and this time he was accompanied by a young woman, handsome and of a fine presence, but poorly dressed. He did not stay more than five minutes, but the young woman remained behind and did not leave till evening. Then the street door was opened for her by the painter himself, and he bade her good-bye with a touch of something rather warmer, I thought, than friendly greeting.

The young wife meantime was seldom seen. Now and then her pale face appeared at the window, and on fine days she would go out languidly for a short walk. I could see she was being driven melancholy mad by her husband's treatment, for every day the fine, handsome girl came, and, after staying three or four hours, the painter would escort her to the door, laughing and joking as if there had been no misery under the roof.

The poor young woman soon grew worse, and I lost sight of her entirely. Then there appeared on the scene a stout, middle-aged woman, evidently an attendant from a lunatic asylum, and it was four or five weeks before this woman took her departure. A few days after she had gone Simpson came in, and I bade him set to work at once to piece together the most fascinating set of fragments I had yet laid before him.

"I at once determined," he began, "when

he looked in about a week later to give me the result of his investigation, "that I must make my approach by getting into conversation with the pretty young wife. Pale and ill as she looks she has been out every day. I discovered that the Broad Walk in Regent's Park was her favourite haunt, and by the time the poor little woman got so far she was always ready to sit down. I soon managed to open a conversation with her; for there is something in my appearance which always inspires women, and especially young ones, with confidence; and after a day or two I let her see that I knew something of the goings and comings and mysterious goings on generally in the house over the way.

"She started violently, and a flush of colour came over her pale face, but she said nothing. I could see, however, that the shot had told, and that she was burning to find some one she could trust to share with her the secret, the weight of which was bearing her to the ground. The next day I found her in the same place, evidently looking for my coming, and before we parted I had heard the solution of the mystery. This is it, as nearly as I can tell it, in her own words:

"My husband is an artist, Vincent Rose by name. We have been married just two years, and, until a few months ago, we were very poor indeed. Fortune, however, came to us very suddenly, and now, after having nearly starved us, is giving us more than we want. My husband has already earned five hundred pounds this year. Of course I am glad that his genius is at last recognised, but I wish that the money was anywhere else rather than in his pocket, for there is a curse upon it—a curse which will, I am sure, destroy us all.

"During the days of our poverty I cannot tell you how happy we were. My husband made a little by book illustrations, and now and then sold a picture for a few pounds. Out of his earnings we always first put aside the rent and whatever he might want for materials, and then set to work to make the remainder go as far as possible in our housekeeping.

"There was no money to spare for models, so I used to sit to my husband in all sorts of costumes for his subject-pictures; but though he put his best work into these—work which would shame much that is done by men with famous names—he never sold one, or managed to get one hung in any public exhibition. A

dozen or more of them still stand piled against the wall. Now I suppose they will sell fast enough; but we are no longer poor, and the money, when it comes, will only increase my unhappiness.

"About six months ago my husband met in the studio of a friend of his a man named Bernard Zink. Though he drew very well himself Zink was not an artist by profession. Many men were in the habit of sending for him to revise the composition of a picture, for he had a wonderful eye for grouping and effect. Sometimes he would touch the outline of a face, and he would never fail to leave a strange and subtle, yet most life-like expression, an expression which no after work by another hand could obliterate. It was understood that Zink expected a good fee for his service, so there was little chance that my husband would ever call him in professionally.

"Therefore it was rather a surprise to me to find him one day in the studio standing before one of my husband's historical pictures, and offering various criticisms and suggestions on the treatment of the subject. He greeted me with cringing, over-acted politeness, and when he went away, he swept aside, with a benevolent wave of the hand, my husband's murmured suggestion as to payment for his advice.

"To you, my dear sir," he said, "I shall always be ready to give my best counsel, and I shall ask no better reward than to come and have a chat with you sometimes when the light fails. We must see if we can't get to the bottom of that strange story. Some people would call me a madman, but I see that you have the true philosophic faculty for sifting evidence. Perhaps we will give the world a surprise some day."

"As soon as Zink was gone I naturally wanted to know what was the strange story he had alluded to. Vincent laughed, a little uneasily I thought, and teased me about being a true daughter of Eve, and all I could get him to tell me was that Zink was really a little mad on some subjects. He had been reading Cornelius Agrippa, and other books dealing with occult knowledge, and he believed himself to be on the high road to the discovery of some of the great problems which had baffled the great masters. He was a very amusing fellow, however, and the hints he gave were really very valuable—quite worth the price of having to listen to his fancies for an hour or two.

"After this first visit, Zink often came, and I must say at first I was very glad that Vincent had found some one to chat with, and shake off the worry of work for a time; but, after a little, I began to notice that the two always appeared embarrassed when I came into the room. They would begin to talk about some commonplace matter, and I never heard a whisper of Cornelius Agrippa, or the occult sciences. I concluded that Mr. Zink was diffident about exhibiting his peculiar beliefs in the presence of the inferior sex, so I always went away and left them to themselves.

"All this time, in spite of Mr. Zink's cheerful conversation, Vincent was growing more and more depressed and gloomy. Zink came very often, but as a rule did not stop more than five minutes. One day he came and stayed for some hours, and I did not see him, as I was busy upstairs. When I came down, however, I noted at once a strange change in my husband's manner. He was nervous and excited. His pale cheeks were flushed, and a strange wild light shone in his eyes. He swallowed two or three glasses of water at our midday meal, but scarcely ate a morsel, and was in a great hurry for me to finish and clear the room. As soon as this was done, he told me that he wanted me to sit to him at once for my portrait in my everyday dress, just as I was.

"I was a little disturbed at his excited impatient manner, but it was a relief to find him ready to get back to his work, for, since he had been so intimate with Zink he had scarcely touched a canvas. He kept on, almost without intermission, till dark. The next day he was working without intermission till noon. Then he let me get down for a quarter of an hour to eat a mouthful of food, but he himself took nothing. He painted all the afternoon till the dusk came, then he threw himself into an easy chair, and fell asleep from sheer exhaustion.

"I noticed on his painting-table something which I had never seen before, and this was a small phial of clear glass containing a bright amber-coloured liquid. In mixing the colours for my picture he used occasionally a few drops of this medium. Somehow or other I could not help associating this phial with the unwonted excitement which had possessed him all day, and I was seized with curiosity to examine it. I took it up and removed the stopper, and, to my amazement, the phial grew quite hot in my hand, the fluid began to effervesce, and a pungent but not unpleasant odour

rose from it. I hastily replaced the stopper, and then the bottle gradually became cool again.

"For four or five days my husband worked at my picture so hard that I felt sure he would injure his health. On the very day, almost at the very moment when it was finished, Zink entered the room. He was enthusiastic in his praise of it, and predicted a brilliant future for Vincent. I had never liked the man, but that day my aversion to him rose to positive hatred. I cannot say I was quite satisfied with the portrait. It was marvellously like me, and the treatment masterly all through, but there was a look on the face, especially about the eyes, which I am sure mine never wore. It was a subtle, half-cruel, half-wanton smile, such as one sees in the eyes of a portrait of a lady painted by some great Italian—"La Gioconda," I think it is called. But with my husband it was quite different. From the moment that the picture was finished he could not keep his eyes off it. In gazing at it he seemed to forget my existence. Often I missed him from my side at night, and, on stealing down to the studio, I found him with a lighted lamp, sitting as if in a trance before the canvas.

"I cannot describe the distress I felt at this strange change. It was not merely that my self-love was wounded and the promise of my life blighted. The impending weight of some indefinable calamity seemed to crush me. I dreaded some evil I could neither describe nor define. How I grew to hate that baleful picture before which he would sit for hours! I should have been less unhappy even if I had discovered that he loved another woman.

"On Zink's recommendation, a lady of high rank came to see the picture, and so much was she taken with it that she gave my husband at once a commission to paint her portrait. She was a handsome, gracious lady; but he treated her with a sullen reserve; and all the time she was sitting to him, I could see that he was only thinking of the moment when he should remove her picture from the easel, and sit down before the accursed figure of myself.

"The lady was fairly well pleased with her portrait, but it wanted, she declared, the wonderful and mysterious charm which the painter had been able to throw into the eyes and mouth of his wife's picture. Three or four other ladies called, and all of them, as soon as they saw my portrait, arranged with my husband to sit to him.

He painted them in the same perfunctory way as the first. The portraits were fairly good, but the nameless charm which they found in my picture was wanting in all of them.

"Suddenly the idea struck me that the use of that strange liquid in the little phial might have enabled him to throw that glamour and expression into my eyes and mouth. Then I remembered that Vincent had used the last drop of the medium in giving the final touch to my eyes, and I felt almost convinced that my notion, wild as it was, was not altogether visionary. I asked him one day where he had procured the liquid, and why he did not get some more of it; but my question threw him into a violent rage, and he bade me brutally to mind my own affairs.

"Zink continued his visits, but he never stopped for a chat with Vincent now. My husband seemed to know his ring at the bell, and he would leave his work and rush out of the room, quivering with excitement, to open the door; and, more often than not, I never saw the visitor. After a few minutes' talk outside, Vincent would return with all his excitement quelled, and a look of weary despair upon his face.

"He was so much occupied with his portraits that he had no time for work on subject-pictures. One day, however, I found him busy setting out a large canvas, for what seemed an allegorical work. Zink called that afternoon and stayed some time. In their whispered conversation, I heard him mention my name; but my husband frowned and shook his head. I wondered why, and I was not long kept in ignorance.

"Vincent now rarely spoke to me, save when he wanted something, so it was rather a surprise when he told me next morning that he was going to begin a fresh picture for the next Academy, and that Zink was going to bring him a model to sit for the principal figure. I glanced at the canvas on which the design was roughly sketched out, and saw that the central figure was that of a woman.

"About noon Zink came, bringing with him the model. She was a fine, tall woman, of quiet, gentle manners, and very simply dressed. In other days my husband would have asked me to sit; but I knew that in the strange mood which had come over him, any remonstrance from me would be worse than useless, so I held my peace.

"My husband set to work at the picture, and by night had sketched the woman's head. I had been busy all day, and had

never noticed her face closely; but it happened that I came into the room suddenly, just as the light was beginning to fade, and my eyes fell at once upon her. I started back, and a deadly faintness overcame me; for upon her face was the self-same unholy, mysterious smile, the eyes were quick with the same suggestive baleful light which pervaded my own picture, only here they glowed in flesh and blood, and not upon the inanimate canvas.

"Vincent was working away doggedly—almost fiercely, and I could see that he was dissatisfied with his performance from the tight lips and the frowning brow. As the clock struck five the woman rose to go. She put on her bonnet and left the room, merely bidding me good afternoon, and saying to Vincent that she would return at the same hour to-morrow. He left off work immediately, and his eyes never left her face as long as she remained in the room. That night he never turned to my portrait, which stood on a show easel by the window; but he lay on the sofa in a half-dozing state all the evening.

"The next day his work grew very slowly under his hands, and whenever I happened to look towards him his eyes were fixed in fascinated regard upon the face of the model. Strange to say, I felt no jealousy. I knew that the spell which bound him was never the love of a mortal woman; but something more awesome and mystical—some force without a name, which had equally held him to the worship of a square of painted canvas. I dreaded far more the influence which Zink had gained over him. Often, when lying awake at night, I used to wonder whether the man might not have solved some of these secrets of nature, and probed the depths of those dim abysses which still mock the searchings of our men of science. Of one thing I was well-nigh certain, that his hand worked the charm which had mastered my husband's senses and made him the slave of that witch-like smile. On the day of the second sitting, Zink never appeared. That night I went to bed physically and mentally exhausted, so that I fell at once into a heavy sleep in spite of the trouble which molested me. Suddenly I started up, shaken in a second out of the profoundest slumber into the keenest state of utter wakefulness. The silence and darkness were both intense, but my senses of hearing and sight strained their utmost to make the black stillness give up its secret; and some wild vision swept before

my eyes, and my ears drank in some faint sounds, which in the darkness were terrific enough as I rose from my bed and lighted a candle.

"Vincent was not in the room and the door stood ajar. I could no longer endure the solitude, so I hastily put on some clothes with the intention of descending to the studio. Our bed-room was at the top of the house, and as I neared the studio door I saw that it was open. There was a light inside, and I could hear the sound of voices speaking in a low tone.

"In a moment I quenched my light and stole noiselessly into the room. Just inside the door stood a large screen; and passing behind this, I was able to hear all that was said, and, by peering through a crevice, to see my husband and Zink seated in front of the two portraits, my own and that of the model. The one dim candle on the table made only a faint circle of light, and in this were framed the visages of the two men: Vincent's pale and haggard, every muscle strained as if in obedience to some intense passion whether of fear or longing; and Zink's calm and indifferent, with a look of cunning malice in his sunken eye.

"He cannot let you have it. He will not let you have it, except on these terms," he said, "and to tell you the truth I scarcely dare ask him."

"But he let me have it once, and I will give him any price he likes to ask except—"

"Bah!" said Zink, with a threatening frown, "but you know your own business best. Try how you can get on without it. Look at your wife's portrait, and see how you gave a rendering of a pretty, simple face, in a way that proclaims you a genius, but then you had the essence to help you. Now look at the attempt you have made without it, to catch the expression on your model's face. Can anything be more pitiful? And yet that woman's face is all aglow with that marvellous spirit-fire which you kindled in your wife's eyes without seeing it. My poor Vincent, you are a genius when you paint with the essence, but only then."

"Nevermind, I will try again and again. It is impossible that I should see that face before my eyes every moment, waking or sleeping, without being able to catch the spirit of it sooner or later."

"You forget your model can only give you two more sittings. He wants her elsewhere."

"What, is she too under his orders?"

"Yes, but his rule is very light, very light indeed, as you will find, my dear fellow, when you have signed this agreement." And as he spoke Zink pushed a paper towards my husband and handed him a pen.

"Vincent sat for some time silent.

"No," he said at last, "and yet I have got two days. I cannot believe my hand is paralysed. Come back on Friday night; but Zink, do help me in this. Help me to get the essence without paying such a terrible price."

"Zink did not answer. I heard him moving towards the door as I stole out of the room and regained my bed-chamber. Vincent did not come back, and I found him when I went down to breakfast with another canvas all ready to start his picture afresh. The model came, and he worked all day long at her face with despairing industry. I was in the room when she left, and she said, in her low and gentle voice, that after to-morrow she would be engaged elsewhere.

"I went out soon after, as my head was throbbing with fevered excitement, and I felt as if my brain would burst unless I got into the air, leaving Vincent sitting before his canvas in the deepest dejection. When I came back, after about an hour, the studio was empty, the easel overturned, the canvas torn and trampled upon, and the painted face blurred out of all recognition. Then I knew that despair had conquered, and that the tempter, when he should return, would find an easy prey. To-night he will come, and the last strings of the infernal net which this man-fiend and his familiar have woven, will be knotted securely over my unhappy husband's head."

"Here the young woman paused," Simpson said; "and I sat for some seconds lost in wonder at this strange revival of the infernal temptation on the good old model in a commonplace London street. Presently I turned to address a question to the poor creature, and lo! she was gone. I went the whole length of the Broad Walk, but could see nothing of her. I suppose you did not mark her return. If I were you I should sit up all night, and watch for the coming of Mephisto in the person of Mr. Bernard Zink."

Simpson then took his leave, and it is needless to say I followed his advice. When midnight struck I was wide awake watching, and one o'clock found me on the

alert, though rather weary. Then sleep, which so often refuses to come when I want it, must have mastered me, for I was suddenly awakened by shouts, and the rushing of feet, and the rumble and clatter of wheels. I looked out of the window, and saw that the house over the way was in flames.

The firemen were soon at work, but though the engines did their best it was clear that the flames would have their way till the last remnant of the house was consumed. A fire-escape was placed against the top-floor window and a fireman began to ascend; but scarcely had he mounted a dozen steps, when a floor within collapsed, and a huge burst of flame rushed from the first-floor windows. For a second my vision was dazzled by the awful brilliance; but the moment after, when my eyes cleared, I saw plainly two figures, apparently unharmed, issue from the burning room and float downwards out of sight amidst the grovelling wreaths of smoke. The face of one of them was the face of Zink, now radiant with triumph and malice. With his right hand he grasped lightly the arm of the other, who turned away his face as in an agony of shame and remorse, but the figure I recognised at once as that of the ill-starred painter.

VICTIMS.

By THEO GIFT.

Author of "Lil Lorimer," "An Alibi and its Price," Etc., Etc.

CHAPTER XXVII. FACE TO FACE.

"COME into the confectioner's, and George, my dear, dear fellow, do be calm. This is some horrible mistake. Ladies, you will let us offer you some refreshments," Burt broke in eagerly, his hand on his friend's arm, his lips trembling. He was not at all calm himself. His hand trembled as well as his lips as he put down the money for what he ordered on the counter.

The little tragi-comedy, whose blunders and cross-purposes he had till now been surveying and disentangling with such cool, superior wisdom, had become in one short moment a tragedy indeed, and a tragedy so terrible, so utterly unexpected that he shrank back appalled by the mere thought of what might be the ending of it.

The young surgeon himself, however, seemed to become suddenly cool in proportion to his friend's agitation. His fingers had no shake in them as he handed

glasses and cake plates to the pleased and giggling damsels; and there was no quiver, only a harsh sort of ring in his voice, as he begged them to tell him something more about the wedding.

The young women were only too pleased to obey. Where is the servant girl, English or Parisian, who does not love to describe a wedding? And these girls were in an additionally talkative mood from a sense of aggravation and disappointment in having been, as it were, defrauded of their rightful anticipations.

They were lavish in the description of the grand preparations which for some weeks had been making for their master's wedding; of the improvements and renovations at the Hôtel Mailly, in honour of the bridal couple; of the glories of the "corbeille de mariage" which the whole household had been permitted to see; and particularly of the wedding-dress which formed part of it, a veritable triumph of Worth's—"white satin, Monsieur, draped with cascades of Mechlin lace and rained over with orange blossoms;" finally of the crushing news which had come all of a sudden, that the bride had been taken very ill not long before, and, though recovered, was in such a delicate state of health that the physicians had ordered the wedding to be as quiet and private as possible. There were to be no guests besides the immediate family, no grand breakfast or reception, and the happy couple were to drive away immediately after the ceremony to "The Châlet," a villa at Neuilly belonging to the Count, and not far from the hotel at which the bride and her family had been staying during the last week.

"And they are gone there now—to this Châlet?" Marstland asked. It was the first time he had interrupted, by so much as a word, the rapid discursive dialogue.

"But yes, this moment even, Monsieur. Our new Countess, who is indeed frightfully delicate, though pretty all the same, 'une vraie innocente,' of the type Anglaise——"

"Josephine! Be quiet!" interrupted another of the girls. "Madame la Comtesse is of the type Anglaise, because her mother is an Englishwoman, as Monsieur, who it is easy to see is English too, doubtless knows better than thou."

"Ah! that is true enough, and Monsieur must excuse my folly," said Josephine, good-humouredly; "but in that case he will be still more grieved to hear how ill his 'compatriote' looked at the wedding for which he has unfortunately been too

late. Ill! Mon Dieu, she was as white as her beautiful dress itself when she entered the church; for she did wear the dress at least, though that other ravishing costume of pale-blue velvet for the civil ceremony, was never put on, seeing that, in order to save her strength, the party drove straight from the "Mairie" to the church, and, though we strained our ears, no one heard the sound of her voice once during the service. It was not till after the ceremony, however, when Madame de Mailly and her mother went up to embrace her, that she fainted, and even then they managed to lead her into the sacristy, before she became wholly unconscious. But that was an end of the affair for us. They did not even have the procession down the church afterwards, for, as the sacristan told us, the poor young bride was so weak after her fainting fit that she had to be carried from the vestry door to the carriage; and in the end—figure such a thing to yourself, Monsieur—her mother accompanied her and M. le Comte to the *Châlet*!"

But Josephine's volubility was stopped at this point by a general move on the part of the others, and a cry that it was getting late, and if they did not hurry, the Dowager Countess and her daughters would be at the *Hôtel Mailly* before them.

"Now then, to get to that *Châlet* as soon as possible," Marstrand said, as the last of the quartette whisked out of the doorway, But though he spoke in a perfectly calm voice he did not look at his friend, and Burt noticed that the muscles on the back of his hand were swollen and of a deep purple colour, so that they stood out like cords.

"George," he said anxiously, "what are you thinking of? My dear fellow, where would be the good of that—now?"

Marstrand looked at him.

"When some blackguard takes advantage of your absence to run off with your wife, Burt, I'll ask you that question."

"My poor boy, I don't like to say it; but if my wife cared so little for me as to go off in my absence with a blackguard, I certainly shouldn't trouble myself to follow her. I——"

"No; you'd do like the people in novels, and such rot," Marstrand interrupted, with huge contempt, "go your way, and let her go hers, ask no explanation, and twenty years later find out that you'd sacrificed your own happiness and your wife's honour, and subjected her to half a life of

infamy and injustice rather than act like a man in the first instance. Not I, my Vera!" dropping his voice suddenly to the same low, curious key as before. "I understand you, if no one else does. Poor helpless lamb, deceived, maddened, and dragged half-fainting to the shambles by those accursed—— no, no, Burt, I made my poor young wife a promise as to what I would do if that man ever again dared to force himself into her presence, and—I'm going to keep it."

He took a tighter hold, as he spoke, of a stick he was carrying in his hand—a tough blackthorn branch which he had cut out of a hedge in Brittany the previous day, and had since been trimming into shape. Burt glanced at it uneasily, and was going to speak when the young man checked him.

"Look here, old fellow," he said, not angrily, but with a sort of stern decision, "I think you'd better not come any farther with me at present. You've been awfully kind, I know; but this has touched me deeper than you think, and I can't bear talking or interference from any one. What I've got to do is my own business—to protect my honour and that of my wife, and no human being can stop me in it."

"Well, then, I don't suppose it's any use trying to do so," said Burt slowly.

"It is not; so keep out of it. It'll be better for both of us. I'm sane now; but by Heaven! if any one were to say much to me before—before I get to her, I shouldn't be so long."

"I'll not say a word to you," Burt answered, "but I'll go along all the same. I'll not back out of this now, George, till I've seen you through with it; though I think you're half mad at this moment—and I don't wonder at it!"

They set out together on that understanding. Marstrand had beckoned a *fiacre* while his friend was speaking, and his only answer was a grip of the hand before bidding the man drive like lightning to the station for Neuilly. He never spoke once during the short journey there; but there was something in those recent, deeply-furrowed lines between his eyes, and the way in which the stick bent and quivered every now and then in his grasp, which filled his friend with something more than misgiving.

For himself, Burt was conscious of quite as much indignation and contempt for Vera as for those who had bullied or persuaded

her into the horrible, unseemly marriage of which they had just heard. He was a religious man, a High Churchman, with a great reverence for everything appertaining to sacramental or ecclesiastical ordinances; and the mere idea of a girl who—after going through so solemn a service as that of marriage with one man, and vowing to be true to him for the remainder of her life—could be capable of allowing any mere legal informality to induce her to break through that union, and enter on another with a second man within eight days of the first, seemed to him a proceeding too immoral and unwomanly for credibility; and he failed altogether to comprehend the tenderness which enabled Marstland to feel nothing but an anguish of compassion and yearning for the feeble creature who had at once outraged and betrayed him.

They had been fortunate in getting a train on the point of starting, and on arriving at Neuilly they set out to walk to the Châlet, having been told that it was not five minutes' walk from the station; and had only just turned into the quiet, leaf-shaded road in which the Count's villa was situated, when they were met by an empty carriage-and-pair proceeding in the opposite direction, and which, from the white satin favours and bouquets of flowers decorating both coachman and horses, suggested so forcibly the use to which it had been recently applied that involuntarily both stopped and looked at one another, white to the lips with excitement.

"The carriage!" Burt exclaimed. "George, it must be! Thanks to their driving all the way and our coming by train, they can only have arrived a few minutes before us after all."

The Châlet was a small villa-like residence embowered in tall trees, which completely concealed it from the high road, and further protected from intrusion by locked iron gates and a lodge. The two men had just got in sight of the latter, when Marstland stopped and observed:

"Burt, I think you'd better go ahead, if you don't mind, and ask for the Count at the lodge. Say you know he has returned from Paris—it is possible they may tell you he's not at home—but that you want to see him on important business."

Burt looked at him.

"You are thinking——" he said slowly.

"That this man and his confederates have not gone to the trouble of forbidding the people at Les Châtaigniers to give any

information as to their whereabouts, of hiding in this out-of-the-way suburb, and getting through their mockery of a marriage in the hole-and-corner way those girls described, except through fear of me and of my following, and overtaking them. For the same reason they will probably have ordered the lodge-keeper here not to admit any one answering to my description, but you, being as unlike me as possible, and speaking French like a native, might not come under the same category, and in that case——"

"Once inside the gate, I could make you a sign to join me," said Burt. "I'll go."

He hurried on accordingly, but on reaching the gate soon found that the lodge-keeper's orders had evidently been more precise than Marstland anticipated. He did not, indeed, deny that the Count was at home, but he declined altogether to admit Burt, or even to send in his name, declaring that it was quite impossible for his master to see any one that day. He and Madame la Comtesse had only just arrived at the Châlet after their wedding. If Monsieur's business was of importance, he could mention it by letter.

Burt went back to his friend, hardly knowing whether to feel disappointed or relieved. It would certainly be infinitely better if Marstland could be kept from meeting the Count till his present excitement had a little cooled, but whether this would be practicable under any deterrent he doubted exceedingly, and the doubt became still stronger when, on turning the corner of a buttress, behind which he had left the young surgeon to await his return, or signal, he found no sign of him. Marstland had disappeared!

"By Jove!" Burt said to himself, "he's given me the slip. What a fool I was not to guess that was what he intended!"

It was true. Marstland had no sooner seen from the manner and gestures of his friend and the lodge-keeper that the former was being denied admittance, than he determined not even to waste time in asking for it, but to force an entrance on his own account. No one was in sight at the moment, and the wall, thanks to sundry projecting stones in the buttress, was an easy one to climb. While Burt was still carrying on his argument at the gate Marstland had swung himself to the top, and dropping lightly down on the other side, was making his way as swiftly and quietly

as possible through the thick belt of trees and shrubs, beyond which he could see the walls of the *Châlet* glittering in the sunshine.

There was no one in sight here either. This side of the house, indeed, seemed deserted; but a glass door, opening on to a pretty, flower-girdled lawn, stood open, and Marstland, entering it without question or delay, found himself in a short passage leading to the entrance-hall, across which, at that very moment, a gorgeous-looking footman in livery was carrying a tray of glasses.

Marstland made no pause, but went straight up to him. He had come to the Count's house meaning to ask for that gentleman himself in the first instance; but somehow the very sight of this private and embowered nest, the hall with its flooring of inlaid woods, strewn with costly rugs, its portières of sapphire velvet, and stands of hot-house blossoms, the very flunkey, in his crimson and gold finery, so maddened him that he forgot all prudence and reticence, everything but rage and righteous indignation, and thundered out in a voice which could have been heard at some distance:

"I am Dr. Marstland. I want to see Mrs. Marstland, my wife, at once. She is here."

The Mercury in ruby plush stared at him in undisguised amazement. For an instant he honestly thought that this loud-voiced intruder, with the wild-looking head and beard, flaring eyes, and loosely-cut suit of rough blue serge, was some dangerous lunatic, who had escaped from an asylum, and penetrated by accident into this bridal sanctum. The next moment, however, there came into his powdered head a remembrance of certain mysterious orders given by his master that, under no circumstances and at no time, was an Englishman, answering certainly in description to this audacious individual, to be even admitted within the outer gates, and he drew himself up and answered with scornful dignity:

"You mistake yourself, Monsieur. There is no lady of that name here. This house belongs to M. le Comte de Mailly, and he is not at home to-day to any one. I must ask you to retire at once."

"I shall do no such thing," said Marstland shortly. "I am quite aware that this is the Comte de Mailly's *Châlet*, and I wish to see him as well as my——" but he was interrupted by that subtle change in the

footman's expression and attitude which tells when a third person has appeared unexpectedly on the scene; and glancing upwards the young Englishman became aware that the gentleman of the house was at that moment coming to meet him down a prettily carved wooden staircase, leading from the hall to a gallery above.

There was no possibility of mistaking his identity. The immaculate fit and newness of his clothes; his elaborately waxed moustache; the glitter of his small, pointed boots; more than all, the delicate white orchid blossom relieved against the breast of his coat; testified to the bridegroom without need of words: a bridegroom, however, wearing an expression of such mingled anger and sullenness as scarcely seemed appropriate to the occasion. The anger was expressed in his voice as he asked sharply:

"What is all this? Haven't you said that I do not receive to-day? What does the man want?"

"You, Count de Mailly," cried Marstland, his eyes flashing, his lips quivering, his whole form seeming to dilate and tower over that of the nobleman in front of him. "You, villain, thief, blackguard, buyer of helpless girls, robber of other men's wives! Where is mine whom you have stolen from me? Where is my wife, Vera St. Laurent? Give her to me."

A piercing cry answered him. Marstland's voice, always deep and resonant, and now raised to a threatening pitch, had had power to reach a room opening out of the gallery which ran round the upper half of the hall; a room where Vera, having recovered from her swoon and the fit of exhausting weeping which followed it, was lying on a couch, her head resting on her mother's bosom, her fingers clutched with feeble vehemence on her mother's arm as though to protect herself from any attempt to tear her away from that one refuge left her. At the first sound of that voice from below, however, that familiar voice whose tones had from the first possessed a charm to thrill and inspire her, the girl gave a sudden start and tremble. Madame St. Laurent, dreading what might be happening, knowing that Marstland was on their track, and suspecting that it might indeed be he who was making the noise below, made a sign to the maid to draw a heavy velvet portière across the door, and began to talk in a rapid agitated manner with a view of distracting her daughter's attention. It was no use, however. Vera remained quite

silent for a moment or two, her head a little raised, her eyes dilated, her lips parted and drawn back, and an awful look growing in her white strained features; then, with that shriek, which those who heard it never forgot, she almost bounded to her feet, thrusting her mother away, and crying out:

"It is—it is he! He has not deserted me! He has come after—and you, you—it is you who have deceived me the whole time. Oh, George! George!" She rushed wildly into the gallery as she spoke. She had still on her wedding dress, its rich, pearly folds of lace and satin not so white as the despairing face above them; her hair, from which her mother had removed the veil and wreath, falling in ruffled masses over her shoulders; her soft, bare arms stretched out in an agony of entreaty to the man from whom her own ignorant act, and the cruel deception of others, had severed her. "George! George!" she cried out in her piteous, vibrating accents, "you have come at last; but oh! it is too late—too late now. They said you had deceived me, that I would be disgraced. They made me marry—oh no, no, no!" her voice rising suddenly to a shrill despairing scream, "it can't be true, it can't! I can't be married to him! Oh, George, save me! Kill me or save me. You said you would."

She had stumbled and fallen on her knees, her brow resting on the carved wood-work of the balustrade, her arms still weakly extended to him.

"I will save you yet, my darling, my wife!" Marstland exclaimed, making a dart forwards to get at her; but he had forgotten the Count, who, though, like his rival, he had been stricken dumb and motionless for an instant by the white and terrible apparition of the betrayed and maddened girl, was equal to the occasion.

"Keep back!" he cried out, his face purple and swollen with fury as he interposed his own body between the other man and the staircase. "Keep back, and leave my house this instant, you scoundrel, unless you want me to give you into custody. How dare you force your way into a gentleman's private dwelling and frighten his wife into hysterics, you 'canaille' you? Here Pierre! Antoine! Some of you, turn out this drunken Englishman."

He had put his hand on Marstland's collar as he spoke; but the words and the action cost him dear; for in the same moment he was whirled round and almost

flung to the ground by one turn of the young surgeon's, while the next, that stout blackthorn stick, cut from his own hedges, was whistling through the air and descending in a very rain of blows on his prostrate and writhing body.

Vera had fainted, and her mother and one of the maids carried her, white, cold, and unresisting into the room she had so lately quitted; but it took all the strength of three men-servants to rescue M. le Comte de Mailly from the cruel punishment he was undergoing at the hands of his antagonist, and to thrust the infuriated young man into the street, where, fortunately perhaps, John Burt was still lingering on the look-out for him.

The rivals met between four and five o'clock on the following morning in a secluded grassy glade of the Bois de Boulogne. With great difficulty, and almost by force, Burt had prevented his friend from making a useless scandal and risking being taken into custody by attempting to batter his way back into the house from which he had just been ejected; but though winning the day on this point, and perhaps the more easily because of the exhaustion Marstland was feeling after his late exertions, the artist himself saw that the next step was an inevitable one, and even acted as bearer of the challenge which, within an hour of the occurrences above narrated, Maitland wrote with a hand still quivering from the passionate excitement which could only find relief in action of some sort.

Burt was not without hopes that it might be declined, the Count having the law clearly on his side, and being therefore able to appeal to it for protection; but with all M. de Mailly's faults he was no coward, and had not the slightest thought of saving his own skin at the expense of making public through the law-courts the disgrace and humiliation to which he had just been subjected, and which had left him with his bridal garments cut into unsightly strips, and even his face marked with one long discoloured weal. Both men knew that the duel, unlike most French duels, was to be "à la mort," and that the appeal of the unhappy girl, whom each claimed as his wife, could only be answered by the life of one of them.

They met accordingly. Pistols had been decided upon as the weapons; the Count's late drubbing having left him too sore and

stiff to feel sufficiently confident of his wonted skill in the use of the rapier; but as he was considered one of the best shots of the day this mattered little, and despite his unseen bruises and that ugly mark on his cheek, he presented far the cooler appearance of the two, and leaned nonchalantly against a tree smoking a cigarette and flicking idly at some minute spots of mud which had got on the glossy sleeve of his coat, while the seconds were measuring out the ground, and Marstland, haggard from a sleepless night, flushed with fever, with dry, cracked lips, and hands shaking with passionate excitement, moved restlessly about as though incapable of even standing still. Even the surgeon who had come with the Count and his second in the former's carriage looked pityingly at the young man, and observed to himself that de Mailly might very well have ordered the poor fellow's coffin before starting, and that it was to be hoped he would be merciful enough to put him out of his pain at the first shot.

But there was no thought of mercy in the Count's breast, or of anything else but an almost murderous hate; and just as the two men had been put in position and the signal was about to be given, he tossed his cigarette lightly away, and observed in tones of cool, biting irony, and with his sneering eyes fixed on his antagonist, though he professed to be addressing himself to Burt:

"Monsieur, let me request you to advise your principal to preserve a little more calmness and fire straight. It will really be well both for himself and perhaps—yes, perhaps for some one else—that he should! And, Monsieur, you may also tell him, if you please, that the marriage which he has taken upon himself to resent was an act of the highest benevolence and moral justice on my part, designed for the express purpose of giving a practical and lifelong lesson to a so-called 'ingénue,' on her supreme folly in attempting to be the first woman to outwit and defy a de Mailly. La belle Vera will certainly learn that lesson, humbling as it may be, unless your friend shoots very straight, Monsieur."

"For Heaven's sake, give us the signal!" said Marstland hoarsely.

It was the only answer he made to the brutal gibe which had even provoked a murmur of "Fie, for shame!" from the Count's side; but all the blood in his body seemed concentrated in the two fever spots in his haggard cheeks, and when the double report rang out it was no surprise to anyone to find that he had fired wide by a yard or more, his bullet having lodged in a tree at some distance, while that of the Count just shaved his neck by the twentieth part of an inch, scorching the skin and even cutting off a piece of the coat collar.

A mocking smile lit up de Mailly's face.

"Saved by being too frightened to stand still," he said in an audible aside. Then, raising his voice, "Don't be in a hurry, Monsieur. Any message now that you may like to entrust to me for your too amiable mistress I—" But he was interrupted by the signal, and as the two shots split simultaneously on the ear Marstland staggered back, his left arm pierced just above the elbow, and the blood pouring from it, while at the same moment the Count gave a little spring into the air, and, turning over, fell heavily on his face.

He had been shot through the heart!

Marstland let his pistol fall on to the grass, and, taking off his hat, looked round on the other members of the group with a face perfectly pale now, and filled with a kind of calm, grave light.

"Gentlemen," he said solemnly, "I take you all to witness that this man brought his death upon his own head. What I have done has been for the preservation of my wife's honour. She has been innocent hitherto. She will remain so now."

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"SELF OR BEARER."

CHAPTER I. ON A VERSE OF VIRGIL.

WHEN Virgil represented the souls of infants as lying all together in a cold and comfortless place outside the gates of Tartarus—why not outside the gates of the Elysian Fields, where the air is finer and the temperature more moderate?—he certainly had in his mind the Roman Hospital for Children, the ruins of which may still be seen on Mount Aventine, close to the ancient Porta Navalis, where the population was thickest, the houses tallest, the streets narrowest, the street-cries loudest, the rumbling of the carts noisiest, the smell of onions, oil, and vinegar the most profound, the retail of tunny-fish on the largest scale, and where the population consisted of porters, sailors, riverside men, gladiators, and loafers. It was a very good Hospital. The wards were spacious and lofty; there was a garden, where vegetables, and flowers, and fruit were grown, and there was always plenty of fresh air. The provisions were abundant; the Sisters who nursed the children were mostly young, and generally, therefore, pretty. They dressed in white, simply but gracefully, in respectful, distant imitation of the Vestal Virgins. It was their custom to speak with admiration of the celibate life, though the young doctors and clinical clerks always fell in love with them, and they sometimes went away, and left their Hospital children to be married. Then,

in due course, they were able to set up a little Children's Hospital of their own at home. The Senior Physicians were grave and reverend persons, who knew to the tenth part of a drachm how much powder of kittiwake's brains would cure infantine colic, and how snail-broth should be infused with a certain herb, found only on the Campagna, in order to subdue a quartan fever or ague. The younger doctors were zealous and active—too fond, perhaps, of trying experiments, but devoted to science, and always on the look-out for new specifics. It was a great school of medicine, and the students were notorious in the Quarter for their singing, drinking, dancing, gambling, fighting, lovemaking, tavern-haunting, street-brawling, ruffling, royster-ing, fanfaronade, and gaillardise.

Yet, with all these advantages, the Romans did not understand quite so well as we of later and, in other respects, degenerate age, how to keep the little fluttering spark of life in existence; nor were they so skilful in reading the signs of disease, nor had they so many appliances at hand for relieving the little sufferers. Therefore, there was, in the old Roman Hospital, a continual wailing of the children.

Now, had Virgil visited the Children's Hospital at Shadwell, which was founded, unfortunately, after his time, he would have re-written those lines. He would have represented the souls of those innocents lying all in rows, side by side, in comfortable cots, enjoying a mild air with

no draughts, and Sisters always present with thermometers to regulate the temperature, and an endless supply of bottles and milk. The infant souls would be perfectly happy, just as they are at Shadwell; there would be no wailing at all. Sometimes they would sleep for four-and-twenty hours on end; sometimes they would be sucking their thumbs; sometimes they would be sucking the bottle; at other times they would be kicking fat and lusty legs, or they would be propped up by pillows, looking straight before them with the indifference absolute to outside things, and the perfect self-absorption possible only to infants, mathematicians, and fakeers, their eyes full of the calm, philosophic wisdom which belongs to Babies. One considers this wisdom with mingled pity and envy. Is it a memory or an anticipation? Does it belong to the past or to the future? Is the child remembering the mysterious and unknown past before the soul entered the body, or does it think of what is to come when the earthly pilgrimage is finished? Another theory is that one is born wise, but, owing to some defect in our nursing, one forgets all the wisdom in the first year, and only recovers a few fragments afterwards. Now, whether they are sleeping or waking, the souls of the infants are, one is perfectly convinced, always happy, and always watched over by certain pale-faced, beautiful creatures dressed in long white aprons and white caps, with grave and thoughtful faces, who have no independent existence of their own, nor any thoughts, hopes, desires, or ambitions, but are contented to minister for ever to Baby, mystic and wonderful.

One is sorry that Virgil never had a chance of seeing the Shadwell Hospital, not only because he would have written certain lines differently, but because the place would certainly have inspired him with a line at least of illustration or comparison. There are Babies in it by the score, and every Baby is given to understand on entering the establishment that he is not to cry; that he will not, in fact, want to cry, because all his necessities will be anticipated, and all his pains removed. At home he has been told the same thing, but has never believed it, which is the reason why he has so often sent his father off to work with a headache worse than the Sunday morning skull-splitter—reminiscence of a thirsty night—and why he has every morning rendered his mother to the similitude of a thread-

paper, and kept the whole court awake, and become a terror to the High Street outside the court. Here he cries no longer, and gives no one a headache, but is considerate, and good-tempered, and contented.

The Babies are ranged along the sides of the room in cots, but some are laid in cradles before the open fireplace, and some are placed on top of the stove, like a French dish laid to stew in a Bain-Marie, and some have spray playing upon their faces and down their throats; some are sleeping, some are sucking the bottle, and some are lying broad awake, their grave eyes staring straight before them, as if nothing that goes on outside the crib has the least interest for a Baby. Here and there sits a mother, her child in her lap; but there are not many mothers present, and about the ward all day and all night perpetually hovers the Sister. When one first visits this room, there happens a curious dimness to the eyes with a choking at the throat for thinking of the innocents suffering for the sins of their fathers and the ignorance of their mothers. Presently this feeling passes away, because one perceives that they do not suffer, and one remembers how good it must be for them to be in such a room with pure air, neither too hot nor too cold, with the Sister's careful hands to nurse them, and, for the first time in their young lives, a holy calm around them. To the elder children in the Ward above, the quiet, the gentle ways, the tender hands, and the kindly words, are full of lessons which they will never forget. Why not for the infants, too?

The Sister in this Ward wore a grey woollen dress with a white apron, which covered the whole front of her dress, a "bib apron," a white collar, and a white cap and no cuffs, because cuffs interfere with turning up the sleeves. She was young, but grave of face, with sweet, solemn eyes, and yet a quickly-moved mouth which looked as if it could laugh on small provocation, were it not that her occupation made laughing almost impossible, because Babies have no sense of humour. Her name, in the world, was Calista Cronan, and she was the daughter of Dr. Hyacinth Cronan, of Camden Town. As for her age, she was twenty-two, and as for her figure, her stature, her beauty, and her grace, that, dear reader, matters nothing to you, because she is the next thing to a nun, and we all know that a nun's charms must never be talked about.

It was a Sunday morning—a morning in

early June—when outside there was a divine silence, and even the noisy highway of the Thames was almost quiet. The Sister was loitering round the cribs in her ward, all the Babies having been looked after, washed, put into clean things, and made comfortable for the morning. Two or three mothers—but not many, because there are household duties for the Sunday morning—were sitting with their own Babies in their laps, a thing which did not interfere with Sister Calista's catholic and universal maternity. Everything in the ward was as it should be: the temperature exactly right, the ventilation perfect, the cases satisfactory. Presently the door opened and a young man came in. As he carried no hat and began to walk about the cribs and cradles as if they belonged to him, and as the Sister went to meet him and talked earnestly with him over each baby, and as he had an air of business and duty, it is fair to suppose that this young gentleman was connected with the Medical Staff. He was, in fact, the Resident Medical Officer, and his name was Hugh Aquila.

Mr. Hugh Aquila had passed through his Hospital Course and taken his Medical Degrees with as much credit as is possible for any young man of his age. Merely to belong to the Profession should have been happiness enough for him, who had dreamed all his life of medical science as the one thing, of all things, worthy of a man's intellect and ambition. There are, in fact, other things equally worthy, but as Hugh was going to be Medicine Doctor, it was good for him to believe, while he was young, that there was nothing else. So the young limner believes that there is nothing to worship and follow but his kind of art; and the physician considers himself as the Professor of the One Thing Noble and Necessary—all in capitals. But the fates are unequal, and one man's cup brims over while another's is empty. To this fortunate young man Love had been given as well as the Profession which he desired, and a measure of success and reputation—Love, which so often is kept by Fortune for Consolation Cup, and bestowed upon those who have lost the race and been overthrown and trampled on in the arena, and have got neither laurels nor praise, nor any wreath of victory, nor any golden apples. Yet this young fellow had actually and already obtained the gift of love—though he was as yet no more than five-and-twenty—in addition to his other gifts,

graces, and prizes. Perhaps it does not seem a very great thing to be Resident Medical Officer in a Children's Hospital. But if you happen to be a young man wholly devoted to your Profession, and if you are already in good repute with your seniors, and if you have faith in yourself, and a firm belief in your own powers, and if, further, you see great possibilities in the position for study and increase of knowledge, then you will understand that to be Resident Medical Officer in the Children's Hospital at Shadwell may be a very great thing indeed.

When this Resident Medical had completed his round and finished the work which has every day to be begun again, he stood for a moment at a window looking out into the silent street below. It had been raining and the pavements were wet, but the sun was bright again, and there were light clouds chasing across the sky. Within and without everything was very quiet.

In the week there were noises all round them: the noise of steamers on the river, the noise of work in the London Docks, the murmurs of the multitudes in High Street, Brook Street, Cable Street, and St. George's-in-the-East. But to-day was Sunday morning, and everything was peaceful. The eyes of the young man, as he stood at the window, had a far-off look.

"You look tired, Hugh," said the Sister.

These two were not brother and sister. They were not even, so far as they knew, cousins. Nor had they known each other from infancy. Yet they addressed each other by their Christian-names. To be sure Calista was, professionally, the Universal Sister. But Hugh was certainly not the Universal Brother. This singularity might have given rise to surmise and gossip in the Ward, but for the fact that the Babies took no more notice of it than if it had never occurred at all—it is a way with Babies. The Sister was plain Sister to all the world, and therefore to Hugh Aquila she was Sister as well; but with a difference, for to him she was sister with a small initial, because he had entered into a solemn undertaking and promise, with the Sacrament of Vows and Kisses, to marry her sister after the manner of the world—Norah Cronan, at that time Private Secretary to Mr. Murrledge, of Finsbury Circus. All mankind were Calista's Brothers, and yet she called one or two of them by their Christian-names. One of them was Hugh, her sister's fiancé, the other was a young gentleman who, at

that moment, was actually entering the great doors of the Hospital and making for the direction of the Resident Medical's private room.

Hugh Aquila, M.D., F.R.C.S., and L.R.C.P., was a strong, well-built young man, with big limbs, and a large and capable head—a head which had been endowed with an ample cheek, a reasonable forehead, a firm mouth and chin, steady eyes, set under clear-cut eyebrows, and a nose both broad, straight, and long. This is rather an unusual nose. The nose which is broad and short is the humorous nose, but it generally argues a want of dignity; that which is narrow and long may belong to a most dignified person, but he is too often unsympathetic; that which is both short and narrow shows a lack of everything desirable in man. Since Hugh Aquila's nose was both broad and long, he could laugh and cry over other people's accidents and misfortunes—that is to say, he had sympathy, which is almost as valuable a quality for a young Doctor as for a novelist. Such a young man, one is sure at the very outset, will certainly make a good fight, and win a place somewhere well to the front, if not in the very front and foremost rank; it is not granted to every man to become Commander-in-Chief; there are a great many men, very good men indeed, who miss that supremacy, yet leave behind them a good record for courage, perseverance, and tenacity. Happy is the woman who is loved by such a man!

To add one more detail, Hugh had big, strong hands, but his fingers were delicate as well as strong. This was, perhaps, because he was skilled in anatomy, and already a sure hand in operations.

"Oh, Hugh," said the Sister—it had been Mr. Aquila until a day or two before this—"oh, Hugh, I have had no opportunity before of telling you how glad and happy I am for Norah's sake."

"Thank you, Calista," he replied simply, taking her hand; "everybody is very kind to me, and it is so much the better that we spoke and settled matters before this wonderful Succession."

"Yes, I think it is. Though the Succession ought not to make any difference. Tell me, Hugh, is it long since you began to think of it?"

"I have been here for nearly twelve months; I had been here a week when first I saw Norah in this Ward. I began to think of it, as you say—that is, to think

of her, then and there—my beautiful Norah. She is like you, Calista, and yet unlike. She is as good as you are, but in another way. She belongs to the world, and you—"

"To my Babies," said Calista, smiling.

"I should have put it differently. Strange and wonderful it is, Calista, that such a girl as Norah should be able to love such a man as—"

"No, Hugh; that must not be even thought. Norah is a happy girl to win your love. I suppose it is good that you should think your mistress an angel, because it makes her better. Remember what she thinks of you, her strong, and brave, and clever lover, and do not be too humble. Did you see her yesterday?"

"Yes; in the evening I found time for Camden Town, and had supper with her Ladyship."

Strange to say they both smiled, and then their faces broadened, and they laughed. Did you ever see a Sister in a Hospital laugh? She smiles often. She smiles when the patients thank her and kiss her hand; when they get light-headed and talk nonsense; when they grumble and groan; when they go good, and promise to remain patient and steadfast, clothed in the armour of righteousness; or when they go away cured and strong again, and effusive in thanks; or when they come back again for the tenth time, for there are some known in Hospital Wards who spend as much of their lives as they possibly can in these comfortable places. But no one ever saw a Sister laugh except Hugh; and the effect on the Ward was incongruous, as if a Cardinal should dance a hornpipe, or a Bishop perform a breakdown. Some of the Babies felt it like a note out of harmony, and began the preliminary cough which, as every *père de famille* remembers, heralds the midnight bawl and the promenade about the bedroom. Calista, perhaps, received the cough as a warning; the laugh did not occur again, and, besides, to so sweet a Sister everything must be allowed. Therefore, the cough preliminary was not repeated, and none of the Babies really began to cry.

"His Lordship was present," Hugh repeated. "We had a pipe together. He sat in his robes and his coronet, of course, which become him extremely—especially when he has the pipe in his mouth. Yet I doubt if he is happier. His face expressed some anxiety, as if he was uncertain

about his feet in those dizzy heights, and would like to come down again and be a commoner once more. Perhaps he thinks that when beheading begins again, Viscounts will have an early turn."

"Poor dear father!"

"The brass-plate remains on the door unchanged—the plain H. Cronan, M.D.—and there is the red lamp with the night-bell just as usual. The boy, I believe, runs about with the basket and the bottles as before; the medicines are still made up by his Lordship's illustrious fingers; and he remains what the people unfeelingly call a Common Walker. Not even a carriage with a coronet upon it."

"Oh, it seems too absurd if that is all that is to come of it!"

"Her Ladyship wore her court dress—the black silk one—you know it."

"I know it. But, Hugh, don't laugh. It is a very trying thing for her."

"I am not laughing at her, Calista. She informed me after supper that differences of rank must be respected, and that all matrimonial engagements made before the Succession would have to be reconsidered."

"Oh, Hugh!"

"Uncle Joseph chimed in here. I suppose it was he who started the theory—dear old man! He said that of course his Lordship's daughters were now entitled to look forward to the most desirable alliances possible; they would marry naturally in their own rank, which has so long been kept concealed from them. Right-minded young men, he went on, would not require to be reminded of a thing so obvious. He is, indeed, a delightful old man."

"What did Norah say?"

"She looked at her father, who laughed. As for me, I made a little speech. I said that Norah and I were above all things desirous of pleasing our parents—which is quite true, isn't it? so long as our parents are reasonable and try to please us. But marriage is a thing, I added, which is so curiously personal in its nature, that the most filial sons and daughters are bound to consider themselves first. Therefore, I said, that Norah and I intended to continue our engagement, and to complete it as soon as we possibly could, even if we had to trample on all the distinctions of rank."

Calista sighed. "I wish this dreadful title had never come."

"So do I. A white elephant would have been much more useful. One might

at least kill him, and dissect him, and put his bones together in the back garden. I should like to have a white elephant. But what can be done with a Peerage when the income remains the same, and you have got to go on dispensing your own medicines?"

"But is there nothing at all? It must be an extraordinary Peerage."

"There is nothing, your father tells me."

"Then I am sure the best thing to do will be to make no difference at all, and to go on as if nothing had happened. What does Daffodil say?"

"He takes it pleasantly, after his manner, and laughs at it. In fact, no one would take it seriously if it were not for Uncle Joseph, who has got a fixed idea, which he has communicated to your mother, that every title is accompanied by a princely fortune. It appears that at the Hospital there is some excitement over the event. They haven't had an Honourable at the Hospital for a long time, and they naturally desire to make much of the title. So they have raised his rank, and he is now Baron Daffodil, Viscount Daffodil, and even Earl Daffodil, and while we were taking our cold mutton and pickles a post-card came for him addressed to the Right Honourable and Right Reverend His Grace the Duke Daffodil."

"And what does your mother say, Hugh?"

"She says everything that is kind, and something that is surprising."

And then the young man began talking about himself, and of the time, not far distant, when he would buy a practice and set up for himself, and start that partnership with Norah, and combine the serious work of a physician with love-making, which should be as blackberry-jam to dry bread, or Soyer's sauce to cold mutton, and should turn the gloomy Doctor's house—presumably in Old Burlington Street or Savile Row—into a Palace of Enchantment.

Calista was a good listener, and she heard it all with answering smile and sympathetic eyes, and the young man, in his selfish happiness, accepted her sympathy and interest in his fortunes as if they were things due to him. Everybody used Calista in this fashion.

But the Babies watching their long talk grew suspicious. They were neglected. This young gentleman, whom they knew because twice every day he bent over their

cribs, was not a Baby. Why did the Sister waste her time upon him? So great and so widespread was the uneasiness, that they first began with the cough preliminary already alluded to, and then with one accord burst into that wailing which was familiar to Virgil from his acquaintance with the Hospital near the Porta Navalis.

It was just what you would expect of a man that, at such a juncture, he should meanly run away, and leave the Babies to be wrestled with by the Sister. This is what Hugh did.

He went to his private room, a snuggerly whither the Babies could not follow him, and where he proposed to spend the short remainder of the morning in an easy-chair, with a book in his hand to assist meditation on the virtues and graces of a certain young lady. He did not immediately carry out this intention, because there was a visitor occupying the one easy-chair in the room.

"Why, Dick?" said Hugh. "I did not expect to see you here to-day."

The visitor was a young man about his own age. When Hugh opened the door, he was sitting, with his head bent and his face set in deep gloom. But he hastened to put on a smile—rather a weak and a watery smile.

"I had nothing to do this morning, and so I took the omnibus to the Bank and walked over."

"Are you come to congratulate me, Dick?"

"No, I'm not. Daff told me about the engagement. I suppose you know you've cut me out? Did she tell you how she'd refused me?"

"No. I have not talked about previous aspirants."

"Yes; I asked her to marry me. Half-a-dozen times I asked, and she refused—that's all. Well, I'll congratulate you if you like. But I ought to have been told by some of them that you were in the field. I don't like being kept in the dark."

"There has been no keeping in the dark, because I only came into the field, as you call it, four days ago."

"Well—when are you going to get married?"

Dick looked as if a doubt might be raised as to this assertion.

"I don't know. Perhaps we may have to wait some time. I must find out, first, what my mother will be able to do for me. I haven't seen her yet since our engage-

ment, and I don't know how she will like Norah. What is the matter, Dick? You look pretty bad this morning. If you weren't such a steady file, I should say you had been drinking and keeping late hours."

Dick Murridge was at most times a young man of gloomy and sombre aspect. At this moment, he looked as if sunshine would have no place in his countenance at all; his face was pale, and his hair black and straight; his eyes were black and set back in his head; he had a short moustache; his mouth was set and hard; he never laughed, except in the primitive and primeval manner of laughing, namely, when anybody suffered some grievous misfortune, or when he was able to say a very disagreeable thing; his chin was square and hard. He was dressed quietly, even for his age, with almost ostentatious quietness, in a frock-coat buttoned closely, dark trousers, and tall hat, something like the good young man who on Sunday morning may be met, with a book in his hand, wrapped in a white handkerchief, on his way to early Sunday School. He did not carry a book, but there was about him something which proclaimed contempt of mashers. Barmaids and ballet-girls would feel quite safe and therefore happy with a young man who dressed in this fashion.

"You are such a staid and serious character," continued the Resident, "that it can't be drink and late hours. Got no pain anywhere, have you? Is it some worry?"

"What should I be worried about, I should like to know?" he replied almost savagely.

"Can't say, Dick. Shortness of temper, perhaps. It is like shortness of breath, difficult to cure, but it can be alleviated. Are you going to stay and have some early dinner with me?"

"No; I must go home. My father expects me at half-past one. Sunday dinner at home is as cheerful as a meal in a sepulchre among the bones. But I must go. How does Norah like the Grand Succession and the Family Honours?"

"Oh, it will not make the least difference to us."

"There isn't any money with the title, I hear; but it ought to help a man in your Profession, for his wife to have a handle to her name, even if it's only an Honourable. I'd make it help me I know; if I was a Physician, I'd get money out of it somehow. It's the only thing in the world

worth getting or having. Title! What's a title without an income? But if I had the title I'd soon get the income."

"I believe you would, Dick," Hugh replied quietly.

These two young men had been at school together. Of the old school-days there remained the use of the Christian-name. When they were quite young they may have had the same thoughts and the like ambitions. But their paths from the beginning diverged, and now they were so wide apart that they looked in opposite directions: one to the sunny south, and one to the bleak north. One looked downwards, and the other upwards. One saw a bright and sunny picture, with wonderful and unvarying effects of light and colour, and the other saw only a grey and fog-laden landscape, with a bit of lurid sky; one saw men and women, noble, erect, and godlike; the other saw men and women, creeping, sneaking, backbiting, filching, and treacherous. One longed to give, and the other only lived that he might grab.

Hugh thought he had never seen his former friend more morose and grumpy. This dark and gloomy creature, to want his bright and clever Norah! His cheek flamed at the very thought.

They stood in silence for a while, each expectant that the other would say something. Then Dick asked if Calista was in her Ward, and learning that he would find her there, he went away.

"There is something," said the young Doctor, "not quite right with Dick. He can't have taken to drink. Yet there was a look as of drink—unsteadiness in his hands and eyes, no purpose in his movements, want of will in his manner. There is something very queer about Dick Murridge."

The young Doctor drew two letters from his pocket, and fell to reading them. That is to say, he read them eagerly and yet slowly, as if he wanted to read every word. Nobody shall know what was in the first letter, except that it was signed "Norah", with some very sweet words preceding the signature. He sat with this letter in his hands for a while, meditating on the charms and graces of the writer. Then he put it back into his pocket-book, and read the other letter, which was from his mother.

"MY DEAREST SON," she said, "I am quite ready to believe that your mistress is everything that you believe her to be, as good, and as sweet, and as beautiful. I pray that you may have as good a wife as

you deserve, and that is saying a great deal. Will you please give Norah my love, and tell her I am looking forward with the greatest eagerness to seeing her and getting to know her? As regards your plan and manner of living, I quite approve of your ambition to become a successful Physician. It is fortunate that you are the son of a successful singer, my dear boy. You will have no difficulty in making the attempt. As for my money, it was made for you, and is all your own, if you want it all. There is, however, a great surprise for me in your letter, apart from the news of your engagement, which ought not to be a surprise to a mother. It is the surname and the Christian-name of your fiancée. Is she one of the Clonsilla Cronans? In that case, her Christian-name is easily accounted for. There should be also a Calista in the family, and her father's Christian-name should be Hyacinth. They should also be poor, which I suppose is the case with them, because you tell me her father is a General Practitioner in Camden Town. Tell me, when you write next, about their family, which concerns you in a very strange manner. But of this I will tell you when we meet. I hope to see you—and Norah—next month. But do not forget to answer this question—Is her father's Christian-name Hyacinth?—Your affectionate MOTHER."

"Well, his name is certainly Hyacinth; and there is a Calista in the family. And they are the Clonsilla Cronans. I wonder what the Mater means? After all, she will tell me in her own time."

He laid his head back and closed his eyes. He had been up half the night with a bad case, and he fell asleep instantaneously, and slept till they brought him his early dinner.

There certainly was something very queer with the other young man, and he was going to Calista in order to tell her so. He had been accustomed for a great many years to make Calista that kind of half-confidant who shares all the woes, hears nothing of their cause, and is forgotten when things run smoothly. Persons like Calista always have plenty of friends, who make use of their sympathies when trouble has to be faced.

"Calista," he said, dropping into a chair, "I wish I was dead!"

"Do you, Dick? You said the same thing about two months ago, when I saw you last, yet I heard afterwards that you were cheerful."

"I wish I was dead now, then."

"What has happened? What is the matter?"

"I didn't say anything had happened, I said, 'I wish I was dead'."

"Is that all you have come to tell me?"

"Not quite. I've come to tell you—Oh, Calista, I'm the most miserable, unlucky beggar in the world!"

"What is it, Dick? Have you done anything foolish?"

"I've—I've— He stopped, because he caught Calista's clear eyes gazing steadily in his, and it seemed as if he changed his purpose. "I didn't know," he said, in confusion, "that it would really happen until this morning. Now I find it must."

"What will happen?"

"You will remember my words when it comes off—will you? I came to warn you."

"Well, Dick, if anything is to happen, and I am not to know what it is, I see no use in warning me."

"I warn you because I want you to understand that it is all her own fault."

"Whose own fault?"

"Whose should it be but Norah's? I'm talking about her, ain't I? Very well, then. Let her understand that it is her own fault."

"What has Norah done?"

"She's deceived me. That's what she's done. I've offered myself a dozen times, and she has refused me. Told me there was nobody else that she cared for; said she didn't want to get married; said that last week; and then I hear she's engaged."

"Very well. You are not going to take revenge upon her, are you, Dick? That would be mean indeed."

"Not revenge. It isn't revenge. And yet it's all her own fault, whatever happens."

"You are very mysterious this morning, Dick, and very gloomy. Well, if you have nothing more to say, had you not better be getting back home? It is twelve o'clock already."

"You can tell her if anything happens," he repeated, "that you knew all along it was coming, and that it is all her own fault."

"Go, Dick. You are worse than gloomy this morning. You are wicked. I will listen to you no longer."

He turned and flung himself from the room. I use the word which would have pleased him most, because he desired to

fling himself. The people who fling themselves from a room are the same who curl their lips as well as their locks, and knit a brow as easily as a stocking, and flash flames from their eyes as well as from a lucifer match. But good flinging requires a narrow stage, or, at least, close proximity to the door. At the Adelphi, before the villain flings, it may be observed that he carefully edges up close to the door. Now, the Ward was a long room, and Dick's fling became, before he reached the door-handle, an ignoble stride, which was rendered only partially efficient by his banging the door after him, so that all the Babies jumped.

"Something," said Calista, in the same words as those of the Resident Medical—"something is certainly wrong with Dick. And he is trying to set himself right by laying the blame on Norah. What can it be? And what can he mean by his vague threats?"

She tried to dismiss the subject from her mind. A man does not try to injure a girl because she has refused him. Yet she was uneasy; and in the afternoon, when Norah came to the Hospital, and Hugh made love to her before Calista's eyes, Dick's gloomy words kept repeating themselves in her brain:

"It is all her fault, whatever happens."

CHAPTER II. HIS LORDSHIP'S TOWN HOUSE.

THE residence of Hyacinth Cronan, M.D., L.R.C.P., General Practitioner, was in Camden Street, Camden Town. His Surgery, his consulting-room, and his red lamp were also attached to the same house where patients not only received advice, but saw their medicines mixed before their eyes, and might also, if they wished, have their teeth drawn. The part of Camden Street where he lived is that which lies about the Parish Church, and therefore nearly opposite the cemetery, which is now slowly becoming a kitchen-garden. The house is on the right-hand side, going north, and just beyond that very remarkable survival of rural antiquity, where the old cottages still stand behind long strips of garden running down to the road. Some of the gardens are receptacles for old vehicles and wheelbarrows; some are strewn with the debris of a workshop; some are gardens still, with cabbages and sunflowers. This situation, being in the very heart of Camden Town, is a most desirable one for every medical man who

desires such a practice as Dr. Cronan enjoyed—viz, a wide connection and a large popularity, the confidence of many thousands, and an income of very few hundreds. Probably—it is not safe to make the statement with greater confidence—no practitioner in Camden Town had a larger practice; very few of his brethren, except among the youngest men—those just starting—made a smaller income. No man in the parish, except the postman, walked a greater number of miles every day; nor did anybody, except the tramcar conductor—and even he gets every other Sunday off, which the Doctor does not—worked for longer hours.

There were, in Dr. Cronan's case, the usual compensations; though the income was small, the family was large; there were plenty of wants to exhaust the scanty means; though the loaves were few, the mouths were many. This is, as has often been remarked, one of Dame Nature's playful ways. She substitutes for the things which are missing, those which are superfluous or least prayed for; she adds to the things which are already possessed others which may deprive them of their value. Thus, on him who has the greatest good-fortune, luck, and worldly happiness, she bestows an asthma which deprives him of the power of enjoying anything at all, and when a poor man has succeeded with infinite trouble and self-denial in saving a little money, she sends him an illness or a misfortune which gobbles up his little all; to the rich man she denies an heir, and to the poor man, who has nothing to leave, she showers heirs and heiresses. However, Dame Nature means well, and we are but poor blind mortals, and, doubtless, know not what is best for us. On this principle of playfulness, Nature had enriched Dr. Hyacinth Cronan with ten children, of whom Calista, the eldest, now in her twenty-second year, was, as we have seen, a Sister at the Children's Hospital. The second, named Hyacinth, after his father, was at University College Hospital, on the point of completing his student-time. After Hyacinth came Norah, private secretary to a genealogist, recently engaged to Hugh Aquila. Then followed Patrick, who followed the sea, and was a midshipman, or fourth officer, as, I think, it is now called, on board a P.O. boat in Indian waters. After Pat followed those who were still at school—Alberic, Terence, Geraldine, Larry, Honor, and Kathleen.

It will be understood from these names

that Dr. Cronan was of Irish extraction. He was born, in fact, in Dublin—he still pronounced it Doblun—and he graduated at Trinity College, and such relations as he had were understood by his wife, who never saw any of them, to be still resident in the distressful country, where Irish people are fond of talking about their families. Dr. Cronan, however, hardly ever mentioned his people. Yet he gave all his children Christian-names more common in Ireland than on this side of the Channel. When a man is taciturn on the subject of his origin there is generally a presumption that it is not such as makes men stick out their chins. On the mother's side, however, to make up—Nature's way again—the children could boast of the most honourable connections. Their grandfather had been an Alderman. More important still, he had made money at his trade of chronometer-maker. He was one of those amiable persons who not only take a pride in their calling and turn out none but the very best instruments, but who consider that, next to good work, there is nothing worth thinking of but the saving of money. There are always, everywhere, plenty of these good persons; they save, scrape, stint, skin, and spare through the whole of their lives, happy in leaving behind them a good large fortune to be divided. But in a generation or so, one of them saves so much and has so few heirs that a new family may be founded; generally the money is divided among so many that it just serves to make some of the women of the next generation lead easier lives, and some of the men lazier. It is something to achieve, even to improve the lives of a few unborn women; they certainly will never want to do any work, and perhaps they will not get the chance of marriage, and if they do will be all the better for the money they bring to the family pot. As for the young men, for the most part they run through their money and take a lower place, cheerfully or sulkily, according to taste. It is strange, however, that in a country second only to one in its Love of the Almighty Dollar, justice has never been done to the benefactor who spends his life in saving up for his grandchildren. No poems have been written upon him; no statues have been erected to his honour—no one is expected to go and do the like; he is even held up to ridicule and execration as a money-grubber, a grinder of noses on the grindstone, a hard master—one who will have his pound of flesh. What matter for the

hardness when one thinks of the result? How few among us are there who, in the days of their youth, remember their unborn grandchildren, and resolve to work for them, live for them, and save for them! Think of the resolution that young man must possess who can say: "I mean to scrape and screw all the days of my life for those I shall never live to see. I will deny myself the pleasures and indulgences of my age. I will forego delights, and live laborious days, and all for those who will never know me, and who will forget even to thank me, and very likely will be ashamed of the shop." A noble young man, indeed! Would that, in the last generation but one, there had been a great many more like this young man, Mrs. Cronan's father. Yet he, for one, was not without reward, because he rose to be an Alderman, and was Warden of his Company, and, in both capacities, devoured, in his time, quantities of turtle-soup every year. It was entirely through his virtuous self-denial that Mrs. Cronan, his granddaughter, whom he did not live to see, was possessed of a substantial income, no less than two hundred pounds a year. What the ten children would have done without that two hundred a year one cannot even think. What became of all the rest of the Alderman's money I know not. Some of the grandchildren had, no doubt, run through their portions, and were gone abroad; some were clerks; some had shops; some were professional men; not one, I am sure, was imitating the great example of his grandfather, and saving money for those of the twentieth century to spend.

One evening in June, about half-past nine o'clock, while it is still almost light enough to read without a lamp, Dr. Cronan sat by the empty fireplace in the family dining-room, surrounded by his family. It was not every evening that he could thus sit at his ease, in slippers, with a pipe between his lips, and the "materials" on the table. The room was called the dining-room, but it was used as the family sitting-room, work-room, study, and anything else. They lived in it, they received their visitors in it, and they took their meals in it. The window was open, for it was actually a warm evening, though only at the beginning of June; the gas was lit, and if the room was rather crowded it had a happy look, as if the family were, on the whole, good-tempered. Among those family possessions which the visitor at once involuntarily

recognises, even before he has had time to look at the china and the pictures, good-temper is the first, if it is found in the house at all.

The Cronans took their good temper chiefly from their father—it was just one more of Nature's compensations to make up for the small income. No one ever saw the Doctor cross or irritable, not even when, after a long day's work, he was called out again at bedtime. He was a tall man of spare figure; his once dark hair and whiskers well streaked with grey. His features were clear and handsome, and his blue eyes had a trick of lighting up suddenly, and his mouth of dropping into a smile on small provocation. Certainly not a weeping philosopher, nor one inclined to rail at the times, even if they were ten times as disjointed.

The picture of family life at its easiest and happiest presented in this Camden Town household is reproduced every night in miles of streets and thousands of houses. It is complete when the mother sits—as Mrs. Cronan sat this evening—with a basket of work before her, placidly stitching. She had been married for twenty-four years, and had stitched without stopping for twenty-three years, so that she now desired no other occupation but leisurably stitching. When the children were younger there was greater pressure—the stitching was hurried. Beside her sat her second daughter, Norah. She had a book in her hand, but I think she was not reading much, for she did not turn over the pages, and her eyes were looking through the open window into the back-garden, where two lilacs and a laburnum were in full blossom. When a girl is engaged to the most delightful fellow in the world, and the cleverest, there are not many books which she cares to read. If it be asked why she was not assisting her mother in darning the family stockings, it is enough to reply that a girl who is Private Secretary to a genealogist, who draws a salary and pays for her own board, and who is engaged all day in the most scientific researches, cannot be expected to darn stockings in the evening. Geraldine, the third daughter, was learning a lesson for next day's school, and the three boys, Terence, Alberic, and Larry, were having a Row Royal, in which nobody interfered—in so large a family there is always a row going on between some of the members—over a backgammon-board. That is to say, two of them were quarrelling, and the

third, who ardently desired to swing a shillelagh in the fray, had been hustled and bundled out of the squabble at an early stage, and now sat quiet, waiting for his chance.

Such a picture as this is truly national; it represents the English *bonheur de famille*. Less civilised nations go to theatres, *cafés chantants*, open-air concerts, operas, dances, circuses, public gardens—all kinds of things. All "in family" our people stay at home, each household in its own nest. The elder boys, however, have got a trick of spending the evening out. In his hand the Doctor had an evening paper, and he was reading it slowly, as is the habit with men who have no time for much reading, and sometimes forget the newspaper for many days together. From time to time he jerked a piece of news at his wife, who never read a paper at all, and knew nothing of any politics outside the walls of her own house.

Then the door opened, and an old gentleman came in. He was a very clean, good-looking old gentleman, grave, and even severe, but not benevolent of aspect. Quite the contrary, indeed, though his locks were so silvery white and so abundant, and his beard so beautiful and so creamy. He would have looked benevolent, perhaps, but for his under-lip, which projected and gave a grumpy look to an otherwise open and kindly countenance. This was Uncle Joseph himself. He was dressed in evening costume—not the old-fashioned swallow-tail which old men used to wear by day, but the correct evening dress of the day, with a shirt-front decorated with one stud and a white tie. He wore this dress—a most unusual dress in Camden Town—as if he was accustomed to it, not as if it was a kind of disguise. At sight of their great-uncle, the boys shut up the backgammon-board, and all then retired together promptly, and were heard to finish their game and their quarrel in some upstairs apartment. Norah, for her part, applied herself vigorously to her novel, and her father buried himself in the paper. So great was the popularity of Uncle Joseph.

Uncle Joseph shook his head solemnly, took a chair as if he were assisting at a funeral, and sat down beside his niece—Mrs. Cronan—with a sigh that was almost like a groan. He sighed a great deal in the evening, which, for certain reasons, was a trying time with him.

"Two years ago," he addressed the

Doctor, but received no response from the newspaper, and therefore he turned to his niece. "Two years ago, Maria, I should now, at this moment, half-past nine, be sitting on the right hand, or perhaps the left, of the Chairman. The Banquet would be nearly over, and the eloquence of the evening, in which I always took part in a few well-chosen sentences, would be about to begin. If you sit down at half-past seven or a quarter to eight, the speeches generally begin at half-past nine."

"Yes, indeed, Uncle Joseph," Mrs. Cronan replied with a sigh sympathetic; "it must be a beautiful thing to remember."

"Beautiful indeed, Maria!" He sighed again. "I will take a glass of gin-and-water. But it is over—it is over. I shall hear those speeches no more. I shall drink that champagne no more. Piper sec and Heidsieck are strangers to me henceforth."

"In heaven, uncle," Mrs. Cronan suggested piously, "there is finer champagne."

The old man shook his head doubtfully, as if he thought that could not be.

"And nearly every night, uncle, wasn't it?"

"Nearly every night, Maria. Always in evening dress, and wearing the magnificent jewels of the order. Always the mysterious ceremonies of the Lodge, and the Banquet after the work was done. The Banquet—ah!" again he groaned, "with the champagne. Nearly every day of my life, for more than thirty years—except Sunday—the Banquet and the champagne. In summer, the country Lodges; in winter, London. What a Life, Maria! What a Career! And now it is over."

Uncle Joseph, in fact, had been for something like thirty years the Secretary of a very Exalted Institution in Masonry, much grander than Grand Lodge. In this capacity—for which he was fitted by a very extraordinary memory and as great a genius for ceremonial as if he had been Grand Chamberlain—he was constantly occupied in visiting Lodges, and conducting the mysterious functions of the "higher" degrees, those of which the humble wearer of the blue apron have no knowledge, and the outer world no appreciation. He spent, as he proudly told his niece, nearly every night of his life in this work, and as the Function in every right-minded Lodge is always followed by a Banquet, there was certainly no other man in the whole world, outside Royal circles, who had consumed such an enormous

quantity of champagne, and was possessed of a finer palate. But to all things there cometh an end. The Secretary grew old. He began to find travelling wearisome; his memory began to fail him—it was whispered that he had once imparted the secrets of a Higher instead of a Lower Degree by mistake, a truly dreadful thing to do, and believed to have caused the Earthquake in Java; things began to be said about slipshod conduct of the work; and, finally, the Council resolved that the time was come when he must resign. They gave him, however, a pension of one hundred pounds a year, which he brought to the Cronan household, where he came to lodge and to grumble.

His champagne was cut off; it was gone for good. He would never again—alas!—taste of that divine drink. No wonder that the old man went heavily, and was always discontented. For he craved continually after champagne. He found some consolation in putting on his dress-clothes every night, and in talking over the once splendid past he had a sympathetic listener in his niece, and he found gin-and-water as substitute for champagne, inadequate it is true, but better than nothing.

"It has been a brilliant career, Maria," he said. "Few men—it has often been said in my own presence—have sat at more or at nobler Banquets. I doubt if any man, except a Prince, and he must be a Prince of seventy at least, has drunk more champagne than your poor uncle. Yet such a life has its drawbacks; you can't save money by eating and drinking; the more brilliant it is, the more champagne you drink, the less chance you've got of saving. You can't save champagne, and now, you see, nothing but the memory remains."

"Indeed, Uncle Joseph, we are all proud of you."

"And now I'm come down to a pension of a hundred a year and to gin-and-water. Give me another glass, Maria. Gin-and-water!"

"You must think of the Banquets, uncle, and the great company you kept, uncle."

"The highest in the land," he replied solemnly. "I have initiated and raised to the most sublime Degrees Royal Princes and the noblest of the Nobility, young and old. As for Dukes, Marquises, Earls, and Barons, they have been under my hands, meek and obedient, by the hundred. I've lost count of Baronets, and Knights I value not at all. Yes, Maria. It gives a man some satisfaction in his old age to feel he's

done so much good, and been so greatly honoured. No doubt such a life bestows an Air of Distinction. I put it on with my evening-dress. The jewels are upstairs. It would not be proper to adorn my breast with those splendid regalia outside a Lodge. I can leave my jewels to your children, Maria, but not the Air of Distinction. That can't be left to anybody."

"It cannot, Uncle Joseph, no more than a Smile."

"I've often thought, Maria," the old man continued, "that I should have liked one of your boys to take up the same line. But of course it is too much to expect of them. It is a gift. Such a man as myself can't be made. He is born, as they say of a poet. Either a young man has the genius or he has not. Lord! Most Masters, whether in the Chair or past it, have got no more real knowledge of the Ritual, whatever the Degree, than they have of the Roman Mass."

"Of course I don't know what it is," said Mrs. Cronan; "but I've always understood——"

"You can't understand, Maria. No women can. It's beyond their intellects to understand such sublimity and such intricacy. More than a dozen different Rituals—think of that! Every one complete and different, and all to be worked exact and word for word. All those Rituals at my fingers' ends, without flaw or hitch, and me the man deputed to work them, for instruction, for raising and advancing, and a separate dress for each, with its own Jewels! The aprons and the scarves are upstairs, with the Jewels. But the Rituals—they mustn't be written, and there's no one, anywhere, who knows them like me. They've got a young man in my place. I trained him. But, as for comparing him with me—— Well, I pity the young man. They will make comparisons, and they will despise him."

He shook his head mournfully.

"Your boys are all handsome, Maria. Any of them would look well in the Apron and the Jewels of the Order. But what is one to expect of them when their father has always refused to join the Craft, and scoffs at it openly? It is wrong of him, Maria, and I have known Doctors made by joining a Lodge, and making themselves popular in it. I would have taught your boys, and advanced them, and introduced them. But are they taught reverence for the Ritual? I would have taken them to a school for manners. How are manners

to be learned in Camden Town? I could have shown them a way to associate with the Great. How are they to hope for intimacy with Royalty and the Nobility unless they become Brethren? Why, for my own part, I have conversed with the noblest in the country as their equal—actually their equal. And I have exchanged opinions with the Prince himself without a stammer, Maria."

"Oh, good Lord!"

This unseemly interruption was due to the Doctor, who suddenly jumped up with this profane cry. He dropped back, however, and sat down again, gazing about him with a look of the blindest amazement. The start and the cry might have been forced from him by suddenly sitting on a pin, or by exasperation beyond endurance with Uncle Joseph's tedious prattle, or by some sharp internal pain, or by the recollection of some frightful omission or blunder. But that look of amazement—what did that mean?

"Gracious!" cried Mrs. Cronan; "what has come to you, my dear?"

"Nothing," said the Doctor.

He picked up the paper which he had dropped, folded it very carefully, and placed it in his pocket—a thing which he had never been known to do in all his life before.

"There must be something the matter," his wife persisted. "Is it toothache?"

"It is nothing," he repeated; "nothing of the least importance to us, or to anybody."

"Then it is something," said Norah, "and something that concerns you, at least, papa; and it is something that you read in the paper. Let me read the paper, too."

He made no reply, except to look about him with a bewildered look, as one who wonders what he is going to do next.

"If I am allowed to talk without being interrupted," said Uncle Joseph irritably,

"I was going to say, Maria——"

"Papa, let me see the paper," said Norah again.

"No, my dear, not to-night. I dare say you will hear soon enough."

"I was going to say, Maria——"

"Yes, Uncle Joseph. Your father will show me the paper to-night, Norah," said Mrs. Cronan in a tone which implied that, as a wife, she meant to know the secret, whatever it was. "If there is anything in it which concerns you, of course I can tell it to you in the morning. Go on, Uncle Joseph."

"I was going to say, Maria, when these interruptions began, that there is something in noble blood which one remarks on the very first introduction. It is something——"

Here the door opened, and Uncle Joseph was a third time interrupted. He sat back in his chair, and began to drum the table with his fingers, but only for a few moments, because the thing which followed was of such a surprising and startling character that for once he forgot his own reminiscences.

This late visitor was an elderly man with iron-grey hair, short of stature, and of thick build, but not fat; a man of hard face—hardness in his grey eyes, hardness in his firm-set mouth, hardness in his chin. As he stood in the doorway, Norah, who had her mind full of her novel, thought he looked like a landlord come to sell up everybody without pity. Nobody knew him better than herself, and her knowledge of him did not make that resemblance impossible. For Mr. Murrige was her employer; she was his Private Secretary.

"I don't know, Doctor," said the visitor, "whether I ought to offer you my condolences over the death of your illustrious cousin, or my congratulations on your accession to his honours."

"I don't know, either—hang me if I do!" said the Doctor.

"You have, I suppose, seen the evening papers? The paragraph is in all of them. I wonder how these Editors get hold of news so quickly. The news of his Lordship's death arrived this morning only."

"But my two cousins?"

"One of them died three years ago, and the other three months ago."

"Good Heavens!" cried the Doctor, sinking into his chair.

"Papa," said Norah, "something has happened. I think you had better let me see the paper."

The Doctor sighed, but he drew the thing out of his pocket and handed it to his daughter.

While she ran her eye down the columns nobody spoke. Mrs. Cronan held a needle in suspense at the very moment of action; Uncle Joseph ceased drumming; Mr. Murrige smiled superior as one who knows what is coming; and the Doctor looked more miserable and foolish than at any previous situation in his whole life.

"I have found it!" cried Norah. "Listen, mother. Where is Daffodil? Where is Calista? The children ought to be taken out

of bed and brought down. Oh, here is news! Listen, everybody. Papa, is it possible? You knew it all before, and you told none of us—not even me. Mother, didn't you know?"

"Your mother's grandfather, the Alderman——" Uncle Joseph began; but Norah interrupted, reading breathlessly:

"We have to announce the death of Hugh Hyacinth, Viscount Clonsilla, of the Irish Peerage, which took place in the island of Madeira, a fortnight ago. Lord Clonsilla was born in Dublin in the year 1810, and was therefore in his seventy-fifth year. He married, in 1836, Ursula, daughter of Sir Patrick M'Crath, Baronet, and had issue one son, who died unmarried in the year 1866. The late Lord never took any active part in politics. The heir to the Title is Hugh Hyacinth Cronan, Esquire, M.D., the great-grandson of the first Viscount, and son of the late Hugh Hyacinth Cronan, formerly of the Irish Civil Service. Dr. Cronan has been for many years practising as a Physician in London." THERE!

"What does she mean?" asked Mrs. Cronan helplessly.

"We are all Viscounts and Honourables. Oh," said Norah, "what will Hugh say? What will Calista say? Good gracious! It's like a dream!"

"Hyacinth, tell me this instant," cried Mrs. Cronan again, "what it means?"

"It means, my Lady," said Mr. Murridge, bowing low, though he was an old friend of the family, and had never bowed low before; "it means nothing less than that your noble husband is the Right Honourable the Viscount Clonsilla, of the Irish Peerage. Nothing less, I assure you."

"A Lord Viscount!" said Uncle Joseph. "There was a Viscount once—he was a Templar. Maria, there ought to be, on this occasion, a bottle of Champagne."

"Nothing less," repeated Mr. Murridge.

"And nothing more," said his Lordship. But no one heard him.

"A Viscount! My grandfather was an Alderman—and yet—— Hyacinth, can't you speak? Why have I not been told?"

"It's Duke, Marquis, Earl, Viscount and Baron, Baronet and Knight, unless you reckon the Ranks of Grand Lodge and the Thirty-Third," said Uncle Joseph. "Really, Maria, on such an occasion——"

"There was no use in telling you of a chance which seemed so impossible," said the Doctor.

"And I've been married to a nobleman's

cousin for five-and-twenty years, and never knew it."

"Only his second cousin once removed," said the Doctor. "My dear, I told you the truth. My father was in the Civil Service, as I told you. His grandfather was the first Viscount Clonsilla and the second Lord Clonsilla. When last I heard anything about it, Lord Clonsilla had a son, and a married brother, and a first cousin; all these stood between me and the Title. Was it worth talking about? I had no money; I had never spoken to the Viscount, or set eyes on him. Nor had my father before me. What was the good of my great relations?"

"Great relations are always good," said his wife. "If it hadn't been for the Alderman, my grandfather, and my Uncle Joseph, where would have been the Family Pride?"

"At all events, my Lady," said Mr. Murridge, "there is no doubt possible on the subject. The late Lord's only son died twenty years ago unmarried. His brother, it is true, was married, but he had no children. And the first cousin, who was the Heir Presumptive, died three months ago, also without offspring—S.P. as we say in genealogies. Consequently, the next heir to the Coronet and Title is—your husband."

"Oh," cried Norah, throwing her arms about her father's neck, "I am so glad! You poor dear! You sha'n't go any longer slaving like a postman up and down the streets all day; you sha'n't be waked up by a bell, and made to go out in the middle of the night as if you were a railway-porter; you sha'n't any more make up your own medicines; you shall hand over all your patients to anybody who likes—give them to Hugh if you like. What will Hugh say when he finds out that I am the Honourable Norah—or are we the Ladies Calista and Norah?"

"The Lord knows!" said the Viscount, still looking helpless and bewildered.

"Well, I suppose Hugh won't mind much. Oh, and I suppose we shall go away from Camden Town and live at the West End—Notting Hill, even"—Norah's knowledge of the West was limited—"and drive about in our own carriage, and go to Theatres every night. Daffodil will give up the Hospitals and go into the House——"

"Perhaps we shall all go into the House, Norah, my dear," said her father grimly.

"Oh, you will go into the Upper House! Of course, there's acres and acres of land in Ireland—dirty acres, the novels call them"—Mr. Murrige coughed and the Doctor changed colour—"and a Country House. What is the name of our Country House? Oh! I know it is a beautiful, grand old place, with a lake and swans, and a lovely garden, and the most wonderful glass houses, and a Scotch gardener. I haven't read Miss Braddon for nothing."

"There was a Country House once. It was called Castle Clonsilla. But I believe it tumbled down years ago. The late Lord never saw the place since they shot at his father and hit the priest."

"Well, then, there must be a grand old—old—venerable—ancient—romantic history of the House. You will tell us the Family History, won't you, as soon as we settle down? All the men were knights without fear, and all the ladies were beautiful and without reproach."

"I will tell it you at once: About two hundred years ago there was an attorney in Dublin, named Hyacinth Cronan. Creeping Joe, they called him, so greatly was he admired. He made his son a barrister, and the barrister became a Judge, and the Judge was made, for certain political services, Lord Clonsilla. Crawling Joe, his friends called him, to distinguish him from his father. His son, for other eminent political services, was raised a step in the Irish Peerage at the time of the Union. That is all the family history, Norah; and I am hanged if I see much to be proud of when it is told."

"Not one of them," said Uncle Joseph, "so much as a Provincial Grand Master."

"Oh! And no Banshee? no Ghost? no White Lady? Are you quite sure?" asked Norah.

"Not even so much as a Family Bogey, my dear."

"Well, then there is a Town House somewhere, I am sure. I hope it is in Ireland. I feel real Irish already. To-morrow I shall try The Wearing of the Green. Where is our beautiful Town House—Lady Clonsilla's Town House—where she will live in the season with her daughters, the Ladies Calista, Norah, Honor, and Kathleen?"

"There used to be one over in Dublin, but I suppose it's been sold long ago."

"Well, there's the money and the dirty acres," Norah persisted.

"I wish you good-night, Lady Clonsilla," said Mr. Murrige. "Once more, I congratulate you. Good-night, my Lord."

He bowed very low, much lower than is expected by Viscounts as a rule, and retired.

"I was about to remark, Maria," said Uncle Joseph, "when we were interrupted by Mr. Murrige, that I had always observed something of the Air of Rank in your husband. It was certain, to me, that he was of noble parentage, though he concealed the fact from friends who would have appreciated its importance."

"Yes; you never told me. Oh, Hyacinth!" said his wife reproachfully. "It would have made us all so happy to think that you had such noble blood in your veins."

"My dear," he repeated, "I didn't know there was the least chance of the Peerage. It's the most extraordinary thing that ever happened. And, Maria," he added, rubbing his chin, "I believe I've made the greatest Fool of myself ever known. I'll go and see Murrige about it to-morrow. But I am sure of it, beforehand. There never was a Greater Fool in all the world than your husband, Maria."

"Oh," cried Norah again, "you will look so beautiful in your coronet!"

"Shall I, my dear? I wonder where it is. What is more to the point is, whether the late Lord left any money, and if so, whether he left any to me. There certainly never could have been a Greater Fool than your father, child. Esau's case is about the only one which can compare with it."

"Maria," said Uncle Joseph, "we will all move upwards, immediately, into the highest Society, and we will have a Banquet, with Champagne, every night. On all points of etiquette rely on me. There will be, of course, waiters in evening-dress. It will be exactly like a Banquet of a High Degree, only that ladies will be present and I shall not wear my Jewels. Of course, I shall sit on the right hand of the Chairman and respond for the Craft."

"Oh, Uncle Joseph!" murmured Lady Clonsilla, carried away by the splendour of his imagination.

"As for his Lordship, I will take him in hand at once—"

"I have been the most Almighty Fool," said his Lordship.

"And initiate him to the Loftiest Degrees. I'll do it with my own hand, and then he will be a credit and an honour to the illustrious Peerage of his native country. I can't initiate you, Maria, nor the girls, because you are females. But the boys I can, and I will, and when they are Knights

Templars, Mark Masters, Royal Arches, and Thirty-Seconds, they will not be ashamed to talk with anyone, and will be fit to share in the very highest Society like their Great Uncle." He drank half his glass at a gulp, and went on rather thickly, pointing to the Doctor: "Look at him, Maria! He is a Nobleman all over. Blood in his veins and Aristocracy upon his upper-lip. Didn't I always say there was a Something in your husband above his Pills?"

"It can't be helped, Maria," said the Viscount. "But I wish your husband had not been so great a Fool."

"Why, on the present occasion," Uncle Joseph went on—"an occasion which may never happen again in the History of the Lodge—why, Maria—why is there no champagne? Thank you! I will take—yes—I will take another glass of gin-and-water."

CHAPTER III. A LONG MORNING IN THE CITY.

MR. MURRIDGE was, by profession, a Genealogist. This is a trade in which are few competitors. There are, to be sure, the Heralds, who are a dignified body, and have a College of their own, and on occasions of ceremony wear the most beautiful coats in the world, and, consequently, are tempted to wish that there was a Coronation every week. They also enjoy much finer titles than the Members of the Upper House, being called King-at-Arms, Herald or Pursuivant, Rouge Dragon, Rouge Croix, Bluemantle, and Portecullis. Mr. Murrige possessed no other title than that of plain Mister, which we are not expected to enjoy. It was reported of him, by those who regarded him as an interloper and an unqualified practitioner, that he had originally been apprenticed to a Die-Sinker, and was afterwards employed in engraving coats-of-arms for one who kept a heraldic shop, ornamented outside by the gilded effigies of a Loathly Worm, like unto the Dragon of Spindlestone Heugh. This enterprising tradesman not only engraved shields and furnished family seals, but also found their coats-of-arms for people who had lost them so long that all memory and trace of them had vanished. Nothing proves a family to be old so much as to have lost the memory of their arms. There are many such; they have withered in obscurity and neglect for generations; then one of them makes money, and such gentlemen as this heraldic shopkeeper recover

the long-lost connections and land them proudly among the Barons in the Wars of the Roses. In this way, therefore, old Murrige found himself impelled in the direction of genealogical studies, and in this way he gradually neglected the practice of his art, and transformed himself into a searcher and grubber into family history.

Although there are not many in the trade, it is sometimes profitable. For there are always the New Rich, who continually desire to prove that they have always, though their friends little suspected it, really belonged to the class which rules by Right Divine, and by the same right possesses hereditary brains; and there are, besides these, the Rich *d'outremer*, who bear names of English origin and would fain prove their connection with great English Houses, and are willing to pay handsomely for such a connection. Therefore, old Murrige generally found his hands fully occupied in tracing pedigrees, finding out missing links, proving marriages, establishing American connections, following up lines of descent, converting plain country gentlemen into descendants of Royalty—this is a very lucrative branch of the profession—and in this way bringing vainglory, delight, honour, distinction, and solace to all who could afford to pay for it. So great, indeed, was his skill that he never failed to prove his client a cadet, at least, of some ancient House, and, when there was no Estate involved and the family was supposed to be extinct, he not infrequently made his client the Head of that House. Nothing could be conceived more pleasing to ladies and gentlemen who had been brought up to believe that for them there was no Family History—no more than at the beginning of the world—previous to the Family Shop where the money was made—whether a Shop with a counter, and a till, and an apron; or a Shop with an office and a clerk; or a Shop with a box of pills; or a Shop with a wig and gown; or a Shop with a sword and a red coat; or a Shop with a steel pen and a few pages of blank paper; or a Shop with a bundle of scrip and shares. So that Mr. Murrige was really a Philanthropist of the first water—an eighteen carat Philanthropist. If, from time to time, in his grubbing among genealogies, old wills, and family histories, he came upon curious discoveries which he was able to turn to his own advantage, he is not to be blamed. Notably, there was the succession to the Clonsilla Title, in which, as you will

presently see, he did a very good stroke of business.

He lived modestly in College Street, Camden Town, at the town end, of course, where the trees are and where the gentility of the street do mostly congregate. He was a man of regular habits. Every morning, at the same time, he took the same omnibus to the City; every evening, at the same time, he took the same omnibus back. He took his dinner every day at the same dining-rooms, and always spent the same amount upon it—namely, half-a-crown. When he got home he stayed there. He never read anything at all out of the way of his business, except the newspaper; he always read the same paper—namely, the *Standard*, because it gives most news. Whether his plain and regular life was deliberately chosen on account of parsimony, or whether it had become a habit, in the course of long years, or whether it was caused by smallness of income, nobody knows, because Mr. Murrige neither invited nor offered confidence with anyone.

His office was in Finsbury Circus, where he had two rooms on a second floor; the front room large and light, looking out on the open Place; the back room small and dingy, looking upon the Limbo of chimneys—workshops, back buildings, outhouses, and grimy yards which one finds in that part of London. On the door-posts below, his name was painted: "*Second Floor, JOHN MURRIDGE.*" His own room was furnished with one very large table—genealogists, like civil engineers, require great tables—and another very small one; he had a great bookcase, full of books of reference, such as Dugdale, Douglas, Tonge, Beltram, Wotton, Collins, and Lysons, a really valuable collection; as for the country histories, one needs the resources of a Rothschild to possess them. There was also a large-sized safe in a corner, and there were tin boxes piled one above the other, as in a solicitor's office, and there were three or four chairs. The room at the back was not, properly speaking, furnished at all. That is to say, there was a table at the window with a blotting-pad, and an inkstand, and a chair before it. There was another table beside the fireplace, with a heavy copying-press upon it, the kind with a handle and a screw. This was for the boy-clerk, who posted the letters, copied them, and ran errands. The other table was for Mr. Murrige, Junior—Mr. Richard Murrige. His son and the clerk,

together with the Private Secretary, completed Mr. Murrige's Staff, and formed his Establishment.

As regards Master Dick, it might be said of him, as of a great many others, that he would, doubtless, have been different had his training been other than what it was. Yet his education was not neglected. At school he learned only the things most useful in a commercial life, as a good hand, accounts and book-keeping, shorthand, French, and the art of writing a business-letter. He also had the advantage, being a day-boy, of his father's experience and practical wisdom, which was on tap, so to speak, every evening.

"I have taught my son, sir," Mr. Murrige explained, "to despise the common cant about Honour, Friendship, Justice, Charity, and the rest of it. The world is full of creatures who live by eating each other. There is no other way to live. We come into the City every day to eat each other, and to defend ourselves against those who would eat us. The way is to make as much money as we possibly can. As for Honour, it means that you must play fair where it is your interest, and Friendship means putting other people on to a good thing when you can't get it for yourself, and in exchange for another good thing. Benevolence means keeping the people you are eating up in good temper. Dick quite understands the world. There is no nonsense about Dick. Justice means having all you can get—all that the law allows—to the last penny, and never forgiving anybody. I have made the boy thoroughly understand these principles. He begins life with a clear head, and no sentimental humbug."

It is not often that a boy's views are thus based upon the first elements of life and society, and Dick certainly began life with great advantages.

Unluckily for Dick, he was not allowed to put these principles into practice in an independent way. Mr. Murrige regarded his business as a thing to be kept together, and handed down as a property to his son. He, therefore, without any question as to Dick's aptitude for genealogical research and the art of clothing a man with a pedigree, removed him from school at an early age and placed him in his own back office, where he gave him copying work. You cannot possibly carry out any of these beautiful precepts and maxims on mere copying work.

Unfortunately, too, Mr. Murrige could

never bring himself to trust his son. He was a jealous master, who would let no one into his secrets but himself, and worked, like the mole, underground. So that, though Dick was now three-and-twenty, he knew no more about his father's business than he did at sixteen, when he first took his seat in the back-office. Except that his father would talk over the successful conduct of a case when it was completed, especially if there had been any difficulties or sharp practice in it. He did not dare to complain, but his position made him continually grumpy. It is not a good sign for a young man's future when he nourishes a secret grudge against his father, and when the father, absorbed in his own business, never stops to consider what his son is doing, and how he regards his own position and work.

Dick was now drawing the very handsome salary of seventy-five pounds a year, with breakfast, lodging, washing, supper, if he wanted it, and his Sunday dinner. He was, therefore, rich as clerks at three-and-twenty go. We may allow him eighteenpence a day for his dinner, or ten shillings a week, which comes to twenty-six pounds a year; fifteen pounds a year for his dress, which is not extravagant; ten pounds for a fortnight's holiday in the summer; and five pounds a year for his daily omnibus. There remained the handsome sum of nineteen pounds a year, or rather more than a shilling a day, to cover his amusements and his petty expenses. How many young fellows can afford a shilling a day for pleasure?

Dick had so few pleasures, that he must have been saving money. He was a very quiet young man—sons of masterful fathers generally are; he had taught himself to play the piano a little, and to draw a little, but languidly. When he was at home he spent most of the time at the old piano, which had been his mother's. When he was at the office he spent most of the time in drawing. He had no taste for reading; he seemed to care nothing for the things which form the pleasure of so many young men; he never went to the theatres or music-halls; he had no bicycle, belonged to no athletic club; and, except one or two old school-fellows, he had no friends. Yet of late he had got into the habit of spending every evening out. Where he went, or what he did, his father did not enquire.

A quiet young man, who seemed to be getting through his youth at a regular, even pace, turning neither to the right hand

nor to the left, picking no fruits or flowers, and running after no butterflies, caught by none of the Jack-o'-lanterns which lead astray so many of the London youth—his father should have been satisfied with such a son.

But he was not. Mr. Murrige was disappointed that his son had no passion for anything. Dick was no fool, but he did his work like a machine; he took no interest in his work; he was spiritless.

Now a young man who is not a fool cannot be, though he may appear to be, a machine. Parents who have such sons as Dick should remember this proverb, which is one of the very few omitted from Solomon's Unique Collection—how good it is for the world that this King collected Proverbs instead of old Phœnician Ware and Prehistoric Pots! You will presently discover that Dick was no exception to this proverb.

Mr. Murrige's confidence was enjoyed, to a certain extent, by the young lady named Norah Cronan, who called herself his Private Secretary. He called her his clerk, but it made no difference in the salary, which remained at the same figure as that enjoyed by Dick; namely, seventy-five pounds a year. But he did next to nothing for the money, and she did the work of three men, being as sharp, clever, industrious, and zealous a girl as ever man had the good fortune to engage in his service. She came every morning at eleven, and generally spent an hour or two with her employer before she went off to the Museum, to the Record Office to consult parish registers, to read wills, to make extracts, and do all kinds of genealogical work, which kept her all day long and very often all the evening as well. She was nineteen years of age, and she knew—by heart, I think—nearly every genealogical work that exists in the vernacular. Of course, Mr. Murrige did not wholly trust her; perhaps he was afraid she might make discoveries and keep them to herself and make her own market out of them—he had done so himself in the old days; perhaps there were certain risky connections in his pedigrees which he did not wish to expose to the girl's sharp eyes; perhaps he was constitutionally unable to trust anybody wholly. He might very well have trusted her, because she had never yet suspected that she might become a money-winner instead of a salary-earner—most men never do learn this lesson; still fewer women ever learn it, and so are

contented to go on all their lives upon a wage, and nobly rejoice when the smallness of their own salaries has brought wealth to their employers. Therefore she was honest and carried to Mr. Murrige everything she found, and never dreamed of withholding the least scrap of information. This is praiseworthy in every walk of life, but especially laudable in a genealogist, because this least scrap is always the thing which is of the greatest importance. Such a simple thing, for instance, as a single one-lined entry in a parish register concerning a marriage a hundred years ago has been known to prove a very gold-mine to the discoverer. No man in the City had a more valuable clerk than Mr. Murrige or a cheaper clerk.

Some there are who object to girl-clerks on the ground that although they are always honest, and may be underpaid and overworked to any extent, and though they never grumble and always carry out orders literally and exactly, one cannot swear at them. There is force in the objection, though it is not, I believe, felt by some of the gentlemen who employ girls to sell gloves, and bonnets, and beer, and soda-and-brandy, nor was it felt by Mr. Murrige, who, when Norah first came to him, swore at her every day. She did not like being sworn at. It made her limbs tremble and her face turn red and pale, but she thought it wisest to say nothing about it at home, for the usual reason that there was not much money going and her small salary was useful; and, besides, her brother being a student at University College Hospital, there was, just then, less than usual. Whenever Mr. Murrige's orders were imperfectly obeyed or neglected, he swore at her. Why not? When he was a Prentice he had been sworn at every day, cuffed, caned, and kicked, until he became a smart Prentice and a good engraver. Why should he not swear at his own clerk? He did, and with sad, wearisome iteration of one word, that Norah grew to loathe that word, and to take any amount of pains and trouble in order not to hear it. It is quite a short word and has been mistaken by some for good Saxon. This is wrong. The word was brought into this country by Julius Cæsar himself, who uttered it when he fell upon his nose on landing in Pevensy Bay. By this act he conferred it upon the land, so to speak, by solemn gift and deed, as a possession for ever. Vortigern subsequently taught it to Hengist and his Saxons. St. Edmund of East Anglia

taught it to the Danes just before they cut short his saintly career. Canute and Edmund Ironsides frequently exchanged it, standing a good way apart; Harold, in his last rally, so deeply impressed it upon Duke William that he strictly enjoined his sons never to suffer the word to be lost. It was the only paternal injunction which the Princes agreed in obeying. But the word is not Saxon.

Norah had now, however, been so long with Mr. Murrige, and had worked for him so well—pedigree-hunting is matter of instinct with some, like finding old books, or picking up old coins—that he had almost ceased to use "language" even in her presence. He knew her value, and in his softer moments he had thoughts, even, of raising her salary.

At half-past ten in the morning all City offices are in their first fresh vigour and early morning enthusiasm of work. The glow of the dawn, so to speak, is upon them. The glow lingers till about half-past eleven, when fatigue and languor begin among the younger brethren; at twelve, many have visibly relaxed and have begun to glance at the clock, and to wriggle on their seats. It is not, however, until five in the afternoon that the curse of labour is really felt to weigh heavily upon the shoulders of the young clerk. In Mr. Murrige's outer office there was no languor or fatigue possible, because there was no labour either for Mr. Richard or for the boy. It was a season of forgetfulness. No work had been given to Dick for three weeks, and, except in the evening, when there were letters to be put through the press, no work was ever given to the office-boy. During this enforced idleness, Dick Murrige sat the whole day at his table by the window which commanded a view of back-yards, chimneys, and outhouses. He amused himself by drawing girls' heads upon his blotting-pad in pencil. When one page was covered, he turned it over and drew on the next, so that the pad was become a perfect gallery of loveliness. By dint of long practice he could draw a girl's face very well, whether full, or in profile, or a three-quarter face. He looked at his watch a good deal, and he grumbled a good deal, and if the office-boy made any noise he used bad language, but not loud enough for his father to hear, because Mr. Murrige was one of those parents who reserve certain vices for their own use and forbid them to their sons.

The office-boy sat at another table on

which was a copying-press. He had nothing to do, as a rule, except to copy letters by means of the press, and to go on errands.

But this boy never found the day too long or the Golden Hours dull. This was because his table had a drawer. Even to an industrious clerk a drawer is a standing temptation. To the lazy clerk it is an ever-present snare; to the clerk who has nothing to do, the drawer is a never-failing solace and resource. This boy, a City-born boy, with sharp eyes, pasty face, and commonplace features, was able, by means of his drawer, to live all day long in another world. He kept it half-open, so that at the least movement or sound from the inner office, or change of position in Mr. Murridge, who sat with his back to him, he could, by a quick, forward movement of his chest, shut the drawer suddenly and noiselessly, and be discovered, so to speak, in the attitude of the expectant, ready, and zealous clerk, eager to do something which would lessen the drain of his three half-crowns a week. Inside the drawer there was always a story—one of those spirit-stirring, exciting, and romantic stories of adventure, which can be bought for a penny, and which never fall upon the reader. So that this boy's days were passed in a delicious and delirious dream of adventure, love, and peril, tempered only by the fear of being suddenly found out and horribly cuffed or even dismissed, when he would catch it worse at home under the family cane. If the boy is not before long enabled to live up to that dream and to become a rover, pirate, smuggler, or highwayman, I fear that his whole future will be wrecked. Because there inevitably comes a time of hope too long deferred, when the realisation of a dream, though possible, no longer seems delightful. This boy, at eighteen, may cease to desire the lawless life; or, if he pursues it, he may become a mere common burglar, forger, long-firm man, confidential-dodge man or welsher—joyless, moody, apprehensive, suspicious, and prone to sneak round a corner at sight of a man in blue-coat and helmet.

In the front room—Mr. Murridge's room—the Chief sat at a great table, covered with papers. He was not consulting any; he had before him half-a-dozen cheques, and he was looking at them with perturbed eyes. Sometimes he compared one with another; sometimes he looked at each separately; and as he looked, his hard face grew harder, and his keen eyes

sharper. Six cheques. They were all drawn for the same sum—twelve pounds; and they were all signed by himself. One would not think that the contemplation of half-a-dozen cheques, payable to self or bearer, signed by one's own name, could take a busy man from his work. But they did.

About eleven o'clock the silence of the office was broken by a light step on the stair. The boy shut up his drawer with a swift and silent jerk of his chest, so that he might be discovered with his elbows on the table, and his hands clasping the handles of the copying-press, a model attitude for the Zealous Unemployed, when the door opened, and a young lady appeared, carrying a black bag. This was the Private Secretary. She nodded pleasantly to Dick, and passed through the room into the inner office. But Dick responded with a grunt.

Mr. Murridge looked up, and greeted her with an ill-tempered snort.

"You're late again," he said.

"I'm not," she replied. "Eleven is striking; and I never am late; and you know it. Be just, even though you are out of temper."

"Your head is turned by your father's Title. I suppose you think you can say what you like. Is the Honourable Norah Cronan going to continue in her present employment?"

"I don't know. Very likely. Mean-time there is this Case to finish. I have brought you some papers you will be pleased to see."

"I don't know that anything can please me this morning. Give them to me. Humph! Mighty little, considering the time you've taken!"

"Hadh't you better read before you grumble? That's always the way with you when you get your fur rubbed the wrong way. Look at this, now."

"Yes; will you read it to me?"

She always "stood up" to him, and generally reduced him to good temper by sheer force of courage. To-day, however, he attempted no rejoinder, but meekly gave in without reply. It astonished her. Perhaps he was ill.

"Go on, please."

Norah, therefore, sat down, and began to explain the nature and the bearing of her papers. Genealogical research is really most interesting work. You are always hunting for someone, and finding someone else. Then you go off on a dozen

hunts; and you discover the most abominable falsehoods in printed pedigrees, with gaping flaws, and disconnections, and impossibilities, where everything looked fair and smooth. The girl enjoyed these things more than Mr. Murrige, for the simple reason that he could never for one moment forget how much money there might be in it. Now, no one ever enjoyed any kind of work, whether it is painting a picture with a brush, or painting a succession of pictures with a little steel pen and a sheet of blue paper, who keeps thinking all the while of the money. But while Norah told her story a strange thing happened—a very strange thing. For the first time in his life Mr. Murrige was inattentive, and that over an important piece of work. He had often before been irritable, but never inattentive.

Outside, Dick Murrige had returned to his blotting-pad, and was gloomily drawing girls' heads upon it. The office-boy opened his drawer again very gently, and resumed the reading of his romance, which had been interrupted at the critical moment when Spring-heel Jack was commencing his earliest love-adventure. The lady was not described with any detail, but the boy concluded that in figure and face she must have greatly resembled Miss Cronan, whom he himself secretly loved, though he was aware that he had a rival. What would Spring-heel Jack have done to a rival? His mistress, since she was like Miss Cronan, was slender in figure, wore a neatly-fitting jacket, and a hat with a red feather in it. She had roses in her cheeks, dark brown hair, and full, steady eyes. The boy did not yet know the adjective, but he knew the quality of steadiness. She also had, like Miss Cronan, a sweet and pleasant smile. The lady in his story, however, did not resemble Miss Cronan in one particular. She was not a young lady "in the City", but was a Countess in her own Right, though disguised as a milkmaid.

Half an hour afterwards the girl came back to the outer office, with her black bag in her hand, on her way to resume her work upon the Case. It was, however, with a sense that her work had not been appreciated. Mr. Murrige was strangely inattentive. She shut the door after her, and turned to Dick, who slightly raised his right shoulder, a gesture familiar to the Grumpy, and considered effective. He then made the same gesture with the left shoulder. This indicates unrelenting Grumpiness.

"Well, Dick?" she said, waiting.

He made no reply whatever. The office-boy felt that he really ought to get up and wring the neck of his master's son for incivility. But he was not yet man enough.

Then Norah crossed the room, and laid her hand on Dick's shoulder.

"Come, Dick," she said, "don't be vindictive. Let us be friends."

"Friends!" he replied. "Oh yes; I know! You told me there was nothing between you and anybody, and next day I am told all about Hugh. Call that truthfulness, I suppose?"

"It was the truth, Dick. It really was."

"I don't believe it. Sapphira!"

"Well, Dick, if you take it like that, I've got nothing to say."

"I don't care what happens now. If anything happens it's your fault—you and all of you."

"What will happen, Dick?"

"Anything may happen, I suppose. How am I to know what will happen?"

"Well, Dick," the girl replied, "I can't stay to guess riddles. Will you shake hands?"

"No. Sapphira!"

Norah retired without another word.

The office-boy thought of Spring-heel Jack, and what he would do under such provocation. But it was useless. He was not man enough by several inches.

Half an hour afterwards there was another step on the stairs. Dick hastened to assume the air of a Junior Partner, and the office-boy once more closed the drawer and grasped the handle of the copying-press.

This time it was Dr. Hyacinth Cronan. He was still in the overwhelming wave of the first day's enjoyment of his new honours. Yet one might have thought that there was something wanting, as if the full flavour of his title had not been quite brought out—it requires time for the complete enjoyment of everything, even a title. His brow was knitted, as they used to say in the old metaphorical times when people would knit a brow as well as a stocking and curl an upper-lip as easily as a ringlet, and hurl scornful words as readily and as effectively as big stones. They could also unhand each other. He looked, to put the thing plainly, disturbed.

"Is your father in his office?" he asked, cutting short Dick Murrige's proposed congratulations. "I will step in."

"I expected you this morning," said Mr. Murrige. "I expected you would look in. You came to talk over the new position. Well, I am not much accustomed"—he laughed a dry laugh—"to advise noble Lords."

"You need not trouble about the title. I came especially to ask you about a certain document which I signed here two or three years ago."

"Quite so. It is in my safe here. For the consideration of two hundred pounds—money down—you resigned the whole of your reversionary interests, whatever they might be."

"I remember the transaction perfectly. You offered me two hundred pounds for my reversionary rights. I wanted the money pretty badly. I always do. The reversionary rights. You explained to me at the time that there were two lives between me and the succession. I thought I had no more chance of the title than I had of the Crown of England. Tell me exactly what it was I sold. There are other rights besides reversionary rights, I suppose?"

"What you sold was your chance of succeeding to the property of which the late Lord Clonsilla was only a life-tenant."

"What made you offer me the money?"

"Because I knew that yours was a substantial chance."

"But there were two lives, men no older than myself, between Lord Clonsilla and myself."

"One of them, when you signed that paper, I knew to be suffering from a hopeless disorder. He died, in fact, a few weeks afterwards. The other had been married for fifteen years without children. I hoped that he would have none. Well, my hopes were well founded; not only are there no children, but the man himself is dead. And you are the new Viscount, and what estate there is has come to me. It isn't much, after all."

"You knew this and you did not tell me?"

"I did. You thought you knew all about it, and you did not even take the trouble to enquire before you signed. Don't talk about honour, Doctor, because in the City there is no such thing. Clever people invented the word in order to keep other people foolish. It was sharp practice—nothing more. I was astonished at the time that a man of your capacity shouldn't have made some enquiries before you sold your rights. Why didn't you?"

"I suppose because I trusted you."

"Did you suppose, then, that I was benevolently giving you two hundred pounds?"

"No; I supposed we were making a fair bet. My chance of the small estate—what is it?—a thousand a year?—was worth, I thought, what you offered."

"Never think in business—never trust—never believe any man."

"If there is no honour there is, I suppose, some kind of fair play between men who deal? Do you call your play fair?"

"Yes, I do. You might have got the same information as I got. But never mind fair play. The estate is mine, and I shall send word to the tenants that they are to pay their rent to me. Do you dispute my claim?"

"I would if I could; but I fear I cannot."

"Think of it. Take legal advice about it. As for the land, it is only a few hundred acres, and none of the tenants have paid the rent for years. They'll have to pay or go now, if there's law left in Ireland. You haven't lost anything. You couldn't have made them pay."

"You ought to have told me—"

"Nonsense, Doctor," Mr. Murrige interrupted him sharply. "That is not the way in which I manage my business. I get hold of a secret, and I use it for my own advantage. I never suspected you were cousin to Lord Clonsilla till you gave me a receipted bill for medical attendance with your full name—Hugh Hyacinth Cronan. Never dreamed of it till then. But when I saw that Christian-name—you are all Hyacinths, you Cronans—I began to suspect, and with a question or two put to you, and a little examination into the pedigree, and a little information about the heir presumptive, I easily arrived at the whole truth, and I used that truth to the best advantage. Why didn't you take the same trouble to protect your rights as I did to acquire them?"

The Doctor made no reply.

"Honour! He talks of honour," Mr. Murrige went on. "Why, what is there in the world but self-interest? Nothing but self-interest, which is the same thing as self-preservation. That is the instinct which makes men gather together, and pass laws, and make pretence of charity, and affection, and honour, and such rubbish. I've got myself to look after; I must make money to keep myself; I shall get old and

past work, and I must make money to support my old age. I make money as I can. No man can say that I have robbed him."

The Doctor at this point started, as if there might be one exception to this general statement. Mr. Murrige paused for a moment, but as nothing was said, he went on:

"I've had to take every advantage, and I have taken every advantage. Very well, then, what have you got to say to that?"

"Nothing at all," said the Doctor, laughing ruefully. "Nothing in the world, except that there's one kind of men who believe and one kind who suspect. Well, I shall go back to my patients." He rose and took his hat. "I wonder if there's ever before been a real Viscount making up his own pills for his own patients in Camden Street, Camden Town. But I don't think I need change the door-plate."

"Wait a moment, Doctor; wait, my Lord," said Mr. Murrige; "you must not go just yet. Dear me! Pills? Patients? For the Viscount Clonsilla? You distress me; your Lordship makes me feel as if I had not done a noble action in—in—in clearing the way for your accession. Why, if it had not been for me, you would still be plain Dr. Cronan!"

"That is true, Mr. Murrige!"

"Why, Doctor—I mean my Lord—there are a thousand ways in which a title may be used. Such a title as yours is a fortune in itself and a certain income—a large income if properly used. Even a Knight can do something, a Baronet can do more; but a Viscount—oh, a Viscount is a tower of strength, especially in London, where all the money is——"

"Am I to let the title out at so much an hour as if it was a donkey on Hampstead Heath?"

"Sit down for five minutes. Of all men, medical men are the least practical. Now, then, put the case plainly. You are Viscount Clonsilla, and you have no money except your professional income and your wife's two hundred a year. You have also your children. Why, to keep up the title decently, you must have two thousand at least. It can't be done at all with less than two thousand. Shall I show you how to make that two thousand?"

"It seems worth hearing, at any rate."

The Doctor sat down again.

"The world, my Lord, is divided into

two classes—those who can use their chances and those who can't."

"Very good."

"I am one of those who know how to use their chances. Now and then I get such a haul as a man who will sell his reversionary interest. But I am not ungrateful. You sold me a certainty for a song, and in return I will show you how to make money out of nothing."

"Go on."

"To begin with, there are always companies, good and bad, going to be started. The great difficulty with them all is to inspire confidence at the outset. For this purpose the names of noblemen—not men of business in the City—are greatly in demand. Now do you begin to see?"

"I do. The name of Lord Clonsilla would look well on a list of Directors."

"More than that; you yourself would look well in the chair. There is nothing against you. An Irish peer with a small property who has been a physician in practice. Come, I will run you. I know of more than one company already that would rejoice in appointing you as Director; as for the qualification——"

"I think," said the Doctor, "that the red lamp will have to stand."

"Then there is philanthropy. Hundreds of societies for every kind of object, and all of them wanting a Lord. An income might be made out of the May meetings alone."

Lord Clonsilla rose and put on his hat.

"Thank you," he said. "There was an old proverb, Noblesse oblige, which, I suppose, is now translated, 'Sell everything you can and take the highest bid.' The red lamp will have to stay where it is, with the brass plate, and the less we say about the title the better. Good-morning, Murrige."

"The man is a fool," said Mr. Murrige when the Doctor was gone; "he was a fool to sign away his interest for a song, and now he is going to fool away his title. Well——"

Then his thoughts returned to the cheques, and his face darkened as he turned back the papers which covered them, and saw them again all spread out before him.

At five minutes to one exactly there ran up the stairs another visitor—for the third time that morning the office-boy jammed his drawer close, and embraced the copying-press. It was hard, because the heroine was at that very moment taking her famous leap from London Bridge, followed by

Spring-heel Jack. He caught her, it will be remembered, in mid-air, and gracefully swam ashore, holding her inanimate form out of the water with his strong left hand. Dick Murridge did not this time pretend to be absorbed in business, because he knew the step.

"Come out and have some dinner, Dick."

It was a young fellow of one or two and twenty, and he had the unmistakable look of a student, not a clerk. The office-boy thought his real name must be Spring-heel Jack, because he bore himself bravely and joyously, and was so comely a young man; and because, as all young highwaymen are, he walked as if he would rather be dancing, and talked as if he would rather be singing, and he was, no doubt, extraordinarily impudent to all persons in authority.

Mr. Richard, on the other hand, would not make at all a good highwayman, because he was generally grumpy. Nobody ever heard of a grumpy highwayman. And as for a pirate, he may carry high spirits to the length of firing pistols under the table, but he may not be grumpy.

"Come along, Dick. I had to do some business in the City for my mother. I say, what a lark it is about the Title! You've heard about it, haven't you?"

"Yes, I've heard. How much money is there in it?"

"I don't know. I got home late last night, and expected a row. Instead of that, if you please, the Mater burst into tears, and cried out: 'Oh, my dear son, your father turns out to be a Viscount in disguise, and you are the Honourable Hyacinth!' Upon my word, Dick, I thought they were all gone mad together, especially as my father stood like a stuck pig—as if he was ashamed of himself—and Norah laughed and said: 'You are the Honourable Daffodil, and I'm the Honourable Norah. Larry is the Honourable Larry, and Calista is the Honourable Calista.' And then Uncle Joe wanted to say something too, but he was up to the back teeth by that time in gin-and-water, and he could only wag his head like Solomon."

"There must be some money in it," said Dick. "People can't sit in the House of Lords without any money."

"We sha'n't be allowed to sit in the House of Lords, it seems, at all, because we're Irish—only Irish, you know. My mother talks already of petitioning the

Queen to remove the disability, which, she says, is a disgrace to the Constitution."

"My father told me this morning. It isn't often he tells me anything. I say, Daff——" Dick grew very red—"I've forgotten something, and must go back to the office and set it right. We'll meet at the usual place in five minutes. Look here. Just cash this cheque for me as you pass the Bank, will you? Thanks. It will save me five minutes. Take it in gold."

He thrust an envelope into his friend's hand, and ran off without waiting for an answer.

"I say," said the Honourable Daffodil, "why should I go to the Bank and do Dick's messages for him? I'm not his clerk, nor his father's clerk, though Norah is. Well, never mind."

The Bank lay in his way to the Crosby Hall, where they proposed to take their dinner. He went in, presented the cheque without looking at it, received the money without counting it, dropped it in his pocket, and went his way to the dining-place, where he met Dick and gave him the money. They had their dinner, and after dinner Daffodil went back to the Hospital in Gower Street, where he received with cheerfulness the congratulations of his friends on his accession to the family honours. These congratulations took the form common among medical students, who have, it must be owned, small respect for hereditary rank. Yet, out of kindness, they promoted their comrade, and gave him several steps in the Peerage, calling him the Right Honourable His Royal Highness Prince Daffodil.

CHAPTER IV. WHO HAS DONE THIS?

THERE were six cheques lying before Mr. Murridge. All of them were drawn for the same amount; all of them, in words and figures, were written exactly alike, save for the date. Mr. Murridge himself wrote a small and well-marked hand, very neat and clear—each letter perfectly formed—such a hand as might be expected of one who has been brought up as an engraver. Yet, for that very reason, perhaps, easier to imitate than a more common and slovenly character. The signatures of these cheques were so perfectly imitated that even Mr. Murridge himself could only tell by the dates which were his own and which were forgeries.

"Six cheques," he said, once more comparing the dates of the cheques with his

own diary, "and four of them—these four—are forgeries. These four."

Again he examined them closely.

They were all drawn for the same amount—namely, twelve pounds. It was an established rule with this methodical man, a rule from which he never departed, always to draw the cheques he wanted for private and domestic use for the same amount—namely, twelve pounds. This enabled him to know by a glance at the bank-book how much he spent on his household, and on salaries, wages, personal expenses, and office. Generally he drew this twelve pounds once a week. Sometimes, however, he would have to draw oftener than once a week. But a cheque for twelve pounds, with his signature, payable to bearer, would be certainly cashed without suspicion or doubt, when presented across the counter.

The forger must have known that practice of his.

Who did know it?

He had before him, besides the cheques themselves, his bank-book and his cheque-book.

"Six cheques," he said, summing up the case, "have been abstracted from the book; not taken altogether, which would have made a sensible gap in the book—I should have noticed that at once—but one taken here and one taken there, so as to escape observation. That was crafty. When could I have left the cheque-book lying about? and who would be in the office when I went out leaving it lying on the table? Six cheques. Four have been presented and paid. There remain two more."

Mr. Murridge's business was not one which required the continual paying into the Bank of money, and the drawing of many cheques. He had his bank-book made up once a month. His son generally called for it. On this occasion he had, himself, while passing the Bank that very morning, three days before the usual time, looked in and asked for it. Therefore, it was probable that the other two cheques would be both presented before the customary day of sending for the bank-book. Evidently the writer of the cheques knew perfectly well the routine of his office as well as his signature.

"It could not be the girl," said Mr. Murridge; "she could never imitate my handwriting to begin with;" he looked at one of her papers. It was written in a large hand, rather clumsy, for Norah belonged to the generation which has not been taught to

write neatly as well as legibly, and the day of the fine Italian hand has quite gone by. Nobody who wrote such a sprawling hand as hers could imitate even distantly Mr. Murridge's neat and clearly-formed characters. "She may have stolen the cheques for someone, though. She may have a lover. Girls will do anything for their lovers. Yet I have always thought her an honest girl. The man who trusts anyone is a Fool."

Then he thought of the office-boy. He, too, was incapable of such an imitation. Yet he might have been put up to the job by someone outside. Very likely it was the boy. Most likely it was the boy. There was also a third person who knew the routine of the office, and his own customs, and daily rules. Mr. Murridge started when he thought of this third person, and his face hardened for a moment, but only for a moment, because the very possibility of such a thing cannot be allowed to be considered.

He placed all the cheques with the bank-book in his pocket, put on his hat, and went slowly out of the office. He was so much troubled in his mind that he actually left the safe unlocked, and all his papers lying on the table, cheque-book and all. This was a thing which he had never done before in his life. The office-boy observed this extraordinary neglect, and thought what a splendid chance would have been presented to Spring-heel Jack had his tyrant master left the safe open.

Mr. Murridge was not the kind of person to begin by crying out that he was robbed. Not at all. He would first be able to lay his hand upon the man who did it. He therefore went to the Bank Manager and requested an interview with the clerk of the pay-counter, merely stating that one of his cheques appeared to have fallen into the wrong hands.

"Can you tell me," he asked, "who presented these cheques?"

The clerk was paying cheques over the counter all day long, and it seemed rather a wild question to ask. But there was one thing in favour of his remembering. The only person who was ever sent to the Bank with Mr. Murridge's private cheques was his son.

"I cannot remember each one. But I remember something about them, because your son usually comes with these twelve-pound cheques."

"Well—what do you remember?"

"Two or three of these cheques—I

think three—were presented by an elderly man with white hair, a white moustache, and a foreign accent, which I noticed. Oh, and he had lost the forefinger of his right hand. He took the money each time in gold, and was a long while counting it."

"An elderly man, with white moustache, and one finger gone. You ought to be able to recognise him."

"I think I should know him. Another of the cheques was presented by a young lady. I should certainly know her," said the clerk with more assurance. "She was well dressed, and very pretty. Oh, I am sure I should know her."

"Oh! Is there anything else you can tell me?"

"Why, there was another cheque presented half an hour ago."

"That makes the fifth," said Mr. Murrige. "Who presented that?"

"A young man—I think I should know him—with light hair and a light moustache. He wore a pot-hat and a red necktie, and had a flower in his button-hole. He walked into the Bank as if the place belonged to him. First he said he would take it anyhow, and then he said he would take it in gold."

"And the other two—these two?"

"They were presented by your son as usual. Your cheques being always for the same amount, and always being presented by your son, made me notice a difference."

"Thank you. Observe that I have made a little alteration. This will, in future, be my signature; you see the difference? Now, if a cheque is presented without the variation, you will please detain the man who presents it, and give him in custody, and send for me. That's all."

He went back to his office. Something was learned. A man with a foreign accent, and one forefinger gone, had presented three of the cheques. A girl, good-looking and well dressed, presented another, and a young gentleman in a pot-hat and a red tie presented another. Not a great deal to help a detective, but something.

His son had not yet returned from his dinner, and the office-boy was still alone.

"Where is the callers' book?" he asked.

The boy produced the book. Mr. Murrige ran his finger slowly down the list, looking for someone to suspect. There was no one. But the last name of all struck him. It was the name of Mr. Hyacinth Cronan, junior. The only visitors that morning had been those members of

the Cronan family. He suddenly remembered that Hyacinth, junior, had a way of walking about as if everything belonged to him, and that he wore a pot-hat, and generally had a flower in his button-hole. Why, in a general way, the descriptions agreed, but then it was impossible.

"What did young Mr. Cronan come here for?" he asked.

"I don't know, sir. He came for Mr. Richard. They went out together at one o'clock."

Mr. Murrige gazed thoughtfully at the boy. Young Cronan might have called at the Bank on his way.

"Go to your dinner," he said to the boy abruptly.

The boy took his hat and disappeared in trepidation, because the history of Springheel Jack was in the drawer. Suppose his master was to open that drawer and discover it! This was exactly what Mr. Murrige proceeded to do. He opened the boy's drawer, and examined it very carefully. There was nothing in it at all, except a boy's penny novel, which he turned over contemptuously, taking no heed of the way in which the boy was spending the office-time. What did it matter to him what the boy did so long as he got through his work? It is not until middle-age that we learn a truth which is not one of the most important laws, yet is not without its uses; namely, that nobody cares how we do spend our time, every man being fully occupied with the spending of his own time.

When Mr. Murrige was quite satisfied in his own mind that there was nothing in the boy's drawer, he turned to his son's table. He did not in the least suspect his son, or connect him with the lost cheques, but it was his nature to search everywhere—even in the least likely places. His profession was to search for missing links. He knew that anywhere he might find a clue. He, therefore, opened the drawers. He turned over the papers, and even examined the blotting-pad, but observed nothing except that the paper was full of girls' heads, drawn in pencil—very prettily, if he had been able to examine them from an artistic point of view.

"The boy does think of something, then," said Mr. Murrige; "if it is only of girls. Perhaps he will wake up now." Dick was, in fact, wide-awake, and had been awake for a long time. "Girls' heads! Well, he is young, and believes in women. Young men very often do."

On the shelves round the room were piles of old letters, documents of no more use to anyone, account-books, and all the litter of thirty years' accumulation. But to search through this mass of papers, black with dust, would take too long. He stood beside his son's table, uncertain, troubled in his mind, not knowing where to look or whom to suspect. Here his son found him, when he returned from dinner at two o'clock, studying the pictures on the blotting-pad.

"Dick," he said, "come into my room. Shut the door. Look here. Do you know these cheques?" He looked at the cheques, and not at his son as he spoke, therefore he did not observe the change of colour which passed swiftly over the young man's face, followed by a quick hardening of the mouth. "Do you know these cheques?"

Dick took them up one by one, and looked at them carefully, taking his time over each.

Then he replied slowly, and in a husky voice:

"Why, they are only the cheques which I have cashed for you, are they not?"

"How many cheques have you cashed for me in the last three weeks? Think!"

"Two; unless— No; two."

"Look at the dates. They have all been presented during the last three weeks. There is no doubt as to that fact, at least. Five out of the seven, Dick, are forgeries. I have been robbed."

"Impossible!" said Dick.

"So I should have said yesterday. To-day I can only repeat, I have been robbed."

Dick showed a face full of astonishment.

"Who can have robbed you?" he asked.

"That, you see, is what we have to find out; and that, by George, I will find out—I will find out, Dick!" He rattled his keys in his pocket. It is supposed that only persons of great resolution rattle their keys when they resolve. But I doubt this. "If I do nothing for the next twelve months I will find out. I have been robbed of sixty pounds—sixty pounds! That won't break me. It isn't the money so much as the villainy which troubles me; villainy about the office; villainy at my very elbow. I'll find out who did it, Dick; and then we will see what the Law can do! Some men when they are robbed—oh, I know it goes on every day!—sit down and hear excuses, and forgive the villain. They let the wife or the daughter come to them and cry, and

then let the fellow go. That is not my sort, Dick. I will catch this fellow wherever he is—I will track him down! He had better have robbed a Bank—which is bound never to forgive—than have robbed me!"

"How—how," asked Dick, clearing his throat again—"how do you propose to find him?"

"As for the amount, it isn't much—sixty pounds. The interest of sixty pounds at five-and-a-half per cent, which I can get if anybody can, is three pounds six shillings a year. An estate in perpetuity, worth three pounds six shillings yearly, has been stolen from me—from you, too, Dick, because I suppose—" Here he stopped to heave a sigh. The Common Lot is hard, but hardest of all to a man who is making money. "I suppose I shall some day have to leave things behind me like everybody else. Three pounds six shillings a year! Think how long it takes to save that. A little perpetual spring, so to speak. Who has done it, you say? That is just exactly what we have to find out; and, by George, Dick, I'll never rest—never—and I'll never let you rest, either—until I have found out the man!"

Two men there are who particularly resent being robbed. The one is the man born to great possessions. He is always obliged to trust people, and he is the natural prey of the crafty, and he feels personally insulted by a breach of trust because it seems to accuse him of being credulous, soft, ignorant of the world, and easily taken in. The other is the man who spends his life in amassing small gains, and knows the value of money, what it represents, how much labour, self-restraint, and the foregoing of this world's pleasures for the sake of getting it, and very often how many tricks, and what crookedness in his pilgrimage. Mr. Murridge was the second of these men. His son watched him curiously and furtively, as he continued wrathfully threatening vengeance and relentless pursuit.

"Well, sir," Dick asked, when the storm subsided, "as yet you have not told me any particulars?"

"I'm coming to them. I don't know very much. But I am sure it will prove enough for a beginning. Many a great robbery has been discovered with fewer facts than these. Now listen, and get them into your head. A clever detective would very soon get a clue out of what I have learned."

He proceeded to relate briefly what we already know.

"Have you got them all?" he asked. "Sit down first and make a note of the dates. They may be important. Remember, an elderly man with a foreign accent, and the forefinger of the right hand gone. A girl. A young fellow with light hair, a pot-hat, a red necktie, and a swaggering air."

"It is not much to remember," said Dick. "But why do you want me to remember them so particularly?"

"Because I want you to find the thief, Dick."

The son started, and lifted his head.

"What?" he cried.

"I want you to find the villain, Dick," Mr. Murrige repeated.

"Me to find him?"

"You shall show me the stuff you are made of. You'll never make a genealogist worth your salt. It's poor work spending every evening over a piano or out in the streets, and all day drawing girls' heads on a blotting-pad. I don't believe you are without brains, Dick. And here's a chance for you to show what you can do."

"Yes," said Dick thoughtfully.

"Besides, I don't want to make a fuss about the matter. Let us work quietly without the police, and the Bank and all. I don't want to arouse suspicion anywhere."

"I see," said Dick. "You want the man who did it not to know that you have found it out already."

"Yes. It shall be your work. It will be an occupation for you. Get to the bottom of this case. Take a week over it. Do nothing else. Think of nothing else. Lord! I should make a beautiful Detective. I've often thought that I should have liked the work. But there's no Money in it."

Dick received these commands with profound amazement.

"Go to the police, if you like. But I would rather you kept it entirely in your own hands. Anyhow, I don't care how you find it out. Here, take the cheques; you may want them, and the cheque-book. That may be useful. Don't let the book lie about, though it would be of no use to anybody, because I've taken the precaution to stop the numbers. And as for the sixth of the stolen cheques—the one which is not yet presented—I'm in great hopes, my boy—particularly if we keep quiet and nothing is said—that the fellow will have the impudence to hand it across the

counter-to-day or to-morrow, when that joker will be pleased to find himself asked to step into the manager's room, while the police are called in to escort him before the Lord Mayor. And as for my signature, I've altered it. And it will be a good long time before anybody gets the chance of getting my cheque-book again."

"I—I will do my best," said his son.

"At present, I confess——"

"Mind, Dick, when you've got anything that looks like a Clue, follow it up—follow it up. Never mind who it is." He was thinking, I am ashamed to say, of his Private Secretary. "Follow up any clue which offers, wherever it may lead you. If you find reason to suspect—even slight reason to suspect anybody—anybody, I say—find out where that person has lately spent his time, and what money he paid away, and to what people, and how he has paid it. Find out his associates. Then find out them. If necessary, make yourself chummy with them; make them believe that you want to cultivate their acquaintance; go to their places of amusement. And mind, not a word to any living creature."

"Not a word," his son repeated shortly. He held in his hand the cheque and the cheque-book, and he had a strange look of astonishment and hesitation.

"Why," Mr. Murrige continued, "what a poor, miserable, sneaking thief he must be! He had six cheques, and he could forge my name so well that even I myself cannot tell the difference. Among those seven cheques I only know my own cheques by the numbers in the book. Yet he fills them up for no more than twelve pounds each. He will be arrested, committed, tried, and sent to penal servitude for sixty pounds. Why, he might have made it a couple of hundred. But he did not know my balance, I suppose. Well, find him for me, Dick. Don't let me have the trouble of hunting him down."

"I will do my best, sir," said Dick; but he looked as if he thought doubtfully of the job.

"Now, there's something else, only this cursed forgery interfered. It is this Clonsilla succession. It was I, you know, who gave the Doctor his title."

"You!"

"No other. He knew, of course, that he was a distant cousin, but he never dreamed of the title falling to him; and three years ago, Dick—three years ago, when I talked the thing over with him,

and showed him that two lives stood between him and the title, he sold his reversionary rights to me—for a song. And now the reversion is mine."

"I thought there was no money in it."

"There's a small Irish estate, which at present is worth nothing, because the tenants won't pay. We shall see about that. But there's a snug little English property, Dick, about which the Doctor knows nothing. It isn't a great thing, but there is a house upon it, with a few acres of land, and it stands in a good position. I think it is let for three hundred a year, and perhaps we shall be able to run up the value a bit. Three hundred pounds a year, my boy, with a good tenant, and I bought it for two hundred pounds down. I'm a landed proprietor, Dick, and you are my heir. You shall be a landed proprietor, too, by Gad, when your turn comes!"

He rubbed his hands cheerfully. His son's face, which ought to have responded with some kind of smile, only darkened more and more. That was, perhaps, his way of expressing joy.

The thought of that snug little English estate made Mr. Murridge so cheerful that he forgot his wrath concerning the forgery.

"It will be a cheering thing," he said, recurring to the subject, "when the Case is completed, for you to think of the man you have conducted to the Lord Mayor, and afterwards to the Central Criminal Court. For sixty pounds—the paltry sum of sixty pounds—he will have purchased the exclusive use of a whitewashed apartment, rent-free, for seven, or perhaps ten years. There will be other advantages—the privilege of a whole year spent alone, with an hour's exercise every day; then a good many years of healthy employment, without any beer, or wine, or tobacco, and no amusements and no idle talk. And when, at last, he comes out, it will be to a world which will turn its back upon him for the rest of his natural life. The hand of Justice is heavy in this country on the man who invades the rights of Property; but the hand of Society is ten times as hard—ten times as hard. So it ought to be—so it ought to be. For, if Property is not held sacred, who would try to make money?"

Dick went back to his own desk, bearing with him the cheques and the cheque-book. He sat down and began to think. He had a week in which he would be left quite undisturbed to find out the forger. A good deal may be done in a week. If

he failed, his father would take up the case for himself—his father, whose scent was as keen as a bloodhound's, and whose pursuit would be as unrelenting. He had a week! For the moment he could not think what was to be done; he had no clue, perhaps; or, perhaps he was not satisfied as to the best way of following up a clue. Perhaps the problem presented itself to him as it would to an outsider. Given a robbery and a forgery. The robbery must have been committed when Mr. Murridge was out—that was certain; the forgery must have been committed by someone well-acquainted with the custom of drawing twelve-pound cheques as well as able to imitate a signature. The only persons who had access to the inner office in Mr. Murridge's absence was himself, Norah Cronan, the office-boy, and the housekeeper; but the latter only when the offices were closed and on Sundays. Suspicion might fall upon any of these four, but especially upon himself and upon Norah. He put this quite clearly to himself. As for the office-boy, no one would suspect him, he was too great a fool even to think of such a crime; and the housekeeper, too, was out of the question. There remained, as the most likely persons to be suspected, himself and Norah.

Having got so far he remained here unable to get any farther; in fact, he came back to it again and again.

"Myself and Norah," he thought. "It must lie between us two—it must lie between us!"

The office-boy watched him curiously. From his position at the other side of the fireplace he looked, so to speak, over Dick's shoulder, and could watch him unseen and unsuspected. There were certain special reasons—in fact, they were concealed in the pocket of his jacket—why the office-boy thought that something was going to happen. There were other reasons, such as a great increase in Mr. Richard's sulkiness, a jumpy manner which had lately come over him, and his rudeness to Miss Cronan, which made this intelligent boy believe that something was going to happen very soon. Then Mr. Murridge had been shut up with his son for three-quarters of an hour. That meant things unusual. And now Mr. Richard, instead of drawing girls' heads, was sitting in moody thought.

You know how strangely, when the mind is greatly exercised and strained, one remembers some little trifle, or forgets some little habitual thing, such as brushing the

hair or putting on a collar. Dick's eyes fell upon his pocket-book, which lay upon his desk. It was a diary, one of the diaries which give a certain small space for every day in the year and a pocket for letters. It belonged, like his purse, and his bunch of keys, essentially to his pocket. Yet he could not remember when he had last carried it in his pocket. Consider, if you are accustomed to a bunch of keys in your pocket, you do not feel their presence, but yet you miss them when they are no longer there. Dick became suddenly conscious that for some time—perhaps an hour—perhaps a whole day—perhaps more—he had not felt the presence of the pocket-book. But his mind had been so much occupied by certain pressing anxieties which beset him about this time, that he had noticed the absence of the book half consciously. Now that he saw it lying on his table he snatched it up, and began turning over the pages, at first confidently and then hurriedly, as one looks for something lost. There was something lost. He shook out the leaves; he looked through them again; he searched the empty pocket. Then he searched his own pockets.

The boy behind him watched with a broad grin of satisfaction, as if he understood the cause of this distress.

Then Dick sprang from his chair and looked under the table, on the floor, in the blotting-pad, in the letter-rack, and in the drawers. Then he began all over again. No Greek mime ever expressed more vividly the anxiety, dismay, and terror of one who has lost a thing of vital importance. The boy felt as if he should like to roll on the floor and scream.

"Have you picked up anything, you boy?" Dick turned upon him fiercely, so that he was fain to repress the smile upon his lips and the light of joy in his eye. "Come here, you little devil!"

The boy obeyed with composed face, and, in fact, with considerable trepidation, because there was something in his jacket-pocket which he ardently desired to conceal from Mr. Richard.

"Have you picked up anything at all?" he asked again.

"What is it?" the boy asked by way of reply. "Is it money dropped?"

"You measly little devil! Why don't you answer? Have you picked up anything? It is something of no importance to anybody—a bit of pink paper."

"I haven't picked up nothing," replied the boy sullenly.

"I've a great mind to search you," said Dick, catching him by the coat-collar. "You're as full of tricks as you can stick."

"Search me, then. Oh yes! Search me. I'll go and call the Guv'nor, and ask him to search me, if you like. You just lemme go, or I'll scream, and bring out the Guv'nor and ask him to search me."

Dick dropped his coat-collar instantly.

"Look here," he said. "Do you know this pocket-book?"

"Never saw it before in my life."

This, I regret to say, was a falsehood. The boy had seen it many times before. Every day Mr. Richard drew that book from his pocket and wrote in it, and then put it back.

"You came here before me this morning. Was it on my desk when you came?"

"Don't know. Never saw it there. Never saw it before in my life."

Dick began to think that he was wrong. The book must have been in his pocket; he must have taken it out without thinking. But where was the—

"You boy," he said, "if you are lying, I'll break every bone in your body."

Modern Boy is so constituted that this threat does not terrify him in the least. Nobody's bones are broken nowadays. It is true that every father has the right to whack and wollop his own son, and sometimes does it, but with discretion, otherwise the School Board Officer will find him out.

"I don't care. Call the Guv'nor, and tell him what you want. I dun know what you've lost. What is it, then?"

"I've lost a—a paper. It was in this book."

"What sort of a paper?"

Dick made no reply. Perhaps the lost paper would be in his own room. Stung by the thought that it might be lying about somewhere, he put on his hat and turned hurriedly away.

"What sort of a paper was it?" asked the boy. "If you give over threatening, I'll help look for it. What sort of a paper?"

"Hold your tongue. You can't help. I've looked everywhere."

"Perhaps," said the boy persuasively—"perhaps it was the housekeeper."

Very few people think of the housekeeper. Yet there is always one in every house let out for offices. She is always elderly—nobody ever heard of a housekeeper in the City dying—and she is generally a grand-

mother with a daughter, also a widow, and three or four little children—they are always little. Grandmothers and children always, in the City, remain at the same age. All the week long the children are hidden away somewhere in the basement; on Saturday afternoons and Sundays they come up and have a high old time, because the front-door is closed, and the place is deserted, and the whole house is their own. Then the office-doors are thrown open and the children run races in the most sacred apartments, and open all the drawers, and ransack their contents, and make themselves acquainted with the clerk's secrets and the Chief's hidden decanter of sherry, and read all the private journals, and pick up the odd lead-pencils, and provide themselves with steel-pens, penholders, blotting-paper, note-paper, letter-paper, foolscap, india-rubber, envelopes, and, in ill-regulated offices, with postage-stamps as well.

Dick rang the bell for the housekeeper. She declared, which was quite true, that she had found nothing, and carried away no papers. She had children in the house, but, unlike children in some offices she could name, her children were never allowed in her offices on Saturday and Sunday.

So she withdrew again, and the lost paper was no nearer recovery.

Perhaps Dick had left it in his own room at home. Pierced by the thought, as with an arrow, he seized his hat and left the office.

Then the office-boy sat down in Mr. Richard's chair, and put his hands into his trousers-pockets, and spread his legs out, and grinned from ear to ear.

"It's coming fast," he said. "Lor! I wish he had searched me. What would the Guv'nor have said when this little envelope was found in one jacket-pocket, and this envelope was found in the other jacket-pocket? And what would Mr. Richard have said? I'm a measly little devil, am I? And Miss Cronan, she's a Sapphier, which rhymes with Liar, and goes with Ananias. I've often heard a boy called Ananias, but never a girl called Sapphier. Sophy I know, but not Sapphier."

He could not resist the temptation of drawing out the two envelopes and looking at the contents.

"Shall I," he said, "knock at the Guv'nor's door and give him these two envelopes at once, or shall I wait? I think I'll wait. Ha! The time will come. Then I shall jump upon him. Then I shall make him wriggle. Then I shall see him curl."

This boy had not read the History of Spring-heel Jack in vain.

But neither at home nor anywhere could Dick Murridge find that lost piece of paper, and the loss of it filled him with anxiety.

CHAPTER V. A STEADY YOUNG MAN'S EVENING.

THAT secluded corner of London which lies hidden behind the three great stations and is separated from the rest of the world by the Hampstead Road on the west, and the St. Pancras Road on the east, contains many houses and harbours many families, whose histories, were they known, are as romantic and wonderful, and as deeply laden with pathos and interest, as any Moated Grange or Shield of Sixteen Quarterings.

One of these houses—for reasons which will be immediately obvious it is not necessary or advisable to name the road in which it stands—is devoted, so to speak, to the nightly conjuring of the Emotions among those who are privileged to enter its walls. No Melodrama ever placed upon the boards of a Theatre arouses more fiercely and more certainly the passions of Terror, Anxiety, Rage, Despair, and Frantic Joy than the simple passes of the great Magician who practises nightly in this house. It is nothing more than a tavern—a simple Corner House, with a signboard and a Bar of many entrances. Yet it has pretensions somewhat above the common, for at the side is another door, and this is inscribed with the legend, "Hotel Entrance." It is a quiet and orderly house, with a family trade, in a quarter where beer is truly the national beverage, and with regular takings. There are never any rows in this house; the landlord has no occasion to persuade the policeman to partial blindness, and the renewal of the licence has never been opposed.

The Spells, Magic and Mystery, are worked on the first-floor, which is let off for a club which meets here every evening, all the year round, except on Sundays. The members would meet on Sundays as well if it were permitted. It is not a club of working-men, nor can it truthfully be called a club of gentlemen, unless the widest possible licence is allowed in the use of that term. On the other hand, the members would be very much offended if they, collectively, were addressed otherwise than as gentlemen; and they all wore

black coats all day long, which is, in a way, the outward livery and badge of gentlemen. Yet very few among them possess such a thing as a dress-coat, so that, perhaps, they are only gentlemen by courtesy. It is, further, a Proprietary Club. There is no Committee of Management; there is no Ballot; there is no Election of Members; there is no book for Candidates' names; there is nothing but the Proprietor. He alone admits the Members, regulates the time of opening and closing, establishes the tariff for drinks and tobacco, and is the Autocrat, Despot, and Absolute Ruler of the Club. There is not even any entrance-fee or subscription. Yet the greatest precautions are taken in the admission of members, and a man stands without, to keep off persons who have not received the right of entry, and, perhaps, to prevent the Club being disagreeably surprised.

At seven o'clock the Club opens every evening. It is not a political club, because Politics are never touched upon; nor is it a Social Club, for the members do not converse together after the manner of ordinary mortals; nor is it a club founded for the advance of any Cause or for the promotion of any Art, or for any Scientific or Intellectual objects whatever. Yet it is a Club where conversation is always animated, and even interjectional, though sometimes monotonous. It is also absorbing, and it brings all heads bent together, it makes all eyes strained; everybody's face is anxious and eager; and it is so witty, so clever, so biting and epigrammatic, that at everything that is said some laugh and shout, and some sigh, weep, and even curse. It is, lastly, a club which contains everything which the members want to make them completely happy, though, unfortunately, the members cannot always get what they want and what they come for.

At eight o'clock in the evening the club is generally in full swing. Anyone looking in at that hour would find a group of men sitting at a table, or arrangement of tables, in the middle of the room, lit by half-a-dozen candles.

The men would be fully absorbed in their occupation, with faces as grave as if they were in church, and eyes as anxious as if they were about to have a tooth out.

There were eight or nine small tables about the room, each provided with a pair of candles, and each occupied by two men.

There was a sideboard, or buffet, with decanters and glasses, cigars, cigarettes, and the usual trimmings, behind which stood a young lady of barmaidenly loveliness. For the look of the thing, there were champagne-bottles, but the customary drink was whisky or bottled stout. A dozen men were standing together about the bar, drinking or talking to the girl. They were those who had come too late for a place, and were waiting their turn. The atmosphere was thick and heavy with tobacco-smoke. There was also an open piano, but no one regarded it.

Among the tables and those who sat out there moved continually a man rather small of stature, but of good proportions, of straight and regular features, and very carefully dressed. He was now advanced in life, being perhaps sixty years of age. His hair was white, and he wore a heavy white moustache. A cigarette was always between his lips; his voice was soft, gentle, and he seemed to have something friendly to say to every one of the members; his smile was kindly; his eyes benevolent; he laughed easily and musically; and there was not a man in the room who did not believe that the Count was his own private, personal, and particular friend. They called him, to show their great respect, the Count. He did not himself claim the title, though, perhaps, he was a Count in his own country, or even a Prince, for he was by birth an Italian, and his card bore the simple name of Signor Giuseppe Piranesi. He had lost the forefinger of his right hand—in a duel, it was understood, about a lady; no doubt a Princess. Everybody believed that the Count had been, in his day, a terrible breaker of ladies' hearts.

In plain words, the place is a gambling club, run by this Italian who was so good a friend to all the members. Not, it must be understood, exactly a Crockford's, but a suburban second-class club, the members of which are chiefly tradesmen dwelling in and about the neighbourhood, and clerks, young and old, in which the stakes are in silver, not in gold; and the group in the middle of the room were playing baccarat, while the smaller tables were occupied by those who played écarté, or any other game of two at which money may be lost or won.

The rich classes have their gambling clubs; the workmen have their clubs where they gamble—a distinction without much difference—in these days of equality.

Why should not the middle classes, the great, virtuous, honourable middle classes, have their gambling clubs as well?

The game of baccarat, as, perhaps, everyone may not know, is played at an arrangement of three card-tables set side by side, the middle one being generally much smaller than the other two. Three players sit at each of the large tables, and two—the dealer and his partner, who keeps the bank—sit at the small table opposite to each other. The dealer gives two cards to the player on his right, two cards to the player on his left, and two to his partner. Before the cards are turned up every player places his stake before him. The amount is limited, and in this small and unpretending coterie the limit was, one is ashamed to say, five shillings only, most of the players hazarding only a shilling. The two players who receive the cards play each for his own table, the dealer for himself. The stakes placed, each player looks at his hand. If he has a Natural—that is, a combination of pips, making, in the aggregate, eight or nine—he shows his cards, and all the players at his table are paid by the dealer. If the dealer has a Natural he is paid at once. If the player has not a Natural, he can order one more card. The players on the right and left of the dealer go on playing so long as they beat the dealer; as soon as one of them is beaten he resigns in favour of the man next to him.

There are other rules in this game, but these are sufficient. There is no play in it; all is as the true gambler loves to have it, pure chance. The player is left to the one thing dear to his heart, the exercise of judgment, prudence, caution, audacity, and perseverance in the amount of his stake. It seems as if the chances were equal all round, but somehow the dealer is supposed to be in the least desirable position, and the players have to take turns to be dealer.

The men at the tables in this vulgar little gambling-den were mostly young, some of them mere boys, who had not long left school, young clerks in the City, who brought their shillings in the hope of turning them into pounds, and played with flushed cheeks, and quivering lips, and eager eyes. Some were middle-aged, and appeared to be, as they were, tradesmen—shopkeepers in the Euston Road or the Camden Road. Their shops were left to the care of their wives and daughters, or to shop-girls, while they came night after

night to tempt fortune at the green table. The humane person feels a profound pity when he considers the position of the small shopkeeper, because he has to fight such a desperate fight against want of capital, want of credit, competition, and the Stores, and because the Devil is always whispering in his ear, "They all cheat. You must cheat, too, if you wish to get on." Yet it must be owned that the small shopkeeper is not always the highest type of Englishman, and in many cases it would be better for him to remain in the cold but wholesome discipline of clerkly or shopmanly servitude, when, perhaps, he would never be tempted to go lusting after the fever joys of gaming. Some of the players were quite old men, whose fingers trembled as they made their game, whose hands could hardly hold the cards, who clutched at the table when the players turned them up, and laughed when they won, and groaned miserably when they lost. They were as fierce and as eager as the boys—more eager, because, of all the joys in life, this was all that was left to them. At the table they could feel once more the blood coursing through their veins, the delirious trembling of hope and fear, the bounding pulse of victory. Play made these old men young again. At the West End the old men, whose work is done, play whist every day. At this club at St. Pancras they play baccarat. The principle is much the same, save that in Pall Mall skill is joined with chance, and the game is not altogether blind.

A mean and vulgar hell. When the boys have lost their money, they will go away and get more—somehow; by borrowing, by pledging, even by stealing and embezzling. Their mistress craves perpetually for money. Those who love her must bring money in their hands. No other gifts will do; she must have gold and silver coins, and if they want to woo her, they must find those coins somehow. She never asks how they find the coins; she has no suspicions, and she has no scruples. Whether the money is honestly earned or stolen matters nothing to her.

Therefore there will come a day in the life of one or two young men now torn by the raptures and anxieties with which the goddess rewards her votaries, when there will be an emigrant-ship in the London Docks ready to be towed out, and on the deck, among the steerage passengers, a lad, one of these lads, standing with a look, half of shame, half of defiance. He has gambled

away home and friends, character and place. When the bell rings, and his father wrings his hand for the last time, he will break down with tears, in thinking of what he has done and what he has lost. Yet the next day, out in the Channel, he will be courting his mistress again, with an old pack of cards and another youth like minded.

Or there is a worse ending still for one or more of these young men—an ending in a Police Court, where a young man stands in the Shameful Dock, and is committed by the Magistrate. As for this middle-aged tradesman here, who comes here every night to play away his profits and his capital, his credit, character, substance, and stock, presently his shop will be shut, and, with wife and children, this gentleman will go away and vanish into the unknown depths known only to the district visitor, the Charity Organisation Society, and the rent-collector. They will very likely rescue the children and alleviate the lot of the wife; but the man's case is hopeless, because, at every depth, there is a den somewhere for those who have a penny to risk and to lose.

As for the old men, they will go on as long as they can drag themselves up the stairs, and I suppose the time is not far distant when, perforce, they must cease to come, and obey reluctantly the summons to go away to a place where, perhaps, there are no games of chance.

Among the players at the middle table sat Dick Murrledge.

His father was right in mistrusting a boy who went about his work like a machine, and seemed to have no passion, no pursuit, no ambition—who committed no small follies, and had none of the head-long faults of ardent youth. Dick had a Pursuit. It was absorbing and entrancing: he followed it with ardour every evening of the week. It was a Pursuit which brought into play, to a very remarkable degree, the maxims which his father had taught him. It requires, for instance, no Law of Honour, except that if you conceal cards, or play false, or do not pay up, you are out-kicked. It makes no foolish pretence about Friendship, Philanthropy, Charity, or any stuff of that kind. At the baccarat table every man is for himself. No skill is wanted; no dull working and daily practice in order to acquire dexterity, which would not be of any use: the whole object of the pursuit is to win money.

Of all the eager and noisy crew who sat at that table, there was not one who was more absorbed in the game than Dick Murrledge. The others shouted and swore great oaths when they won or lost. Dick made no sign. His face betrayed no emotion. The quiet Gambler is the most determined and the most hopeless.

By the side of Dick sat—alas!—young Daffodil Cronan. He was by no means a silent player. His face was flushed with excitement, his hair tossed; his lips were parted, and at every turn of the cards he gasped, whether it brought him victory or loss; only, if he won, he laughed aloud.

The Count stood watching the game. He was a most obliging Proprietor. If anyone wanted to shirk his turn at holding the Bank, which is considered less advantageous than playing against the Bank, the Count would take it for him, smiling cheerfully whether he lost or won. Or, while he stood out, if anyone wanted to play *écarté*, poker, monty, *bézique*, *euchre*, *piquet*, *sechs und sechzig*, two-handed *vingt-et-un*, or any other game whatever, the Count would play with him. He knew all games. He was equally ready to cut through the pack for shillings, or to toss for sovereigns, should any of his members desire it. A most obliging Proprietor. Sometimes he lost and sometimes he won. Whether he lost or whether he won he laughed gently, as if it mattered nothing to him. As for his fairness at play, no one entertained the least doubt. One would like to have the history of such a man. If he would write down his autobiography it would be instructive. But this he will not do unless he be allowed to tell it in his own way, as Mrs. George Anne Bellamy and Madame du Barry have related their lives. The autobiography of the Count would be, I am sure, as interesting as that of Barry Lyndon.

Other attentions he lavished upon the members. If, as sometimes happened, one of them rose hastily from the table, with haggard face and despairing eyes, the loser of everything, the benevolent Proprietor would lend him half-a-sovereign, or half-a-crown, according to the age and social position of that member, and with regard to the amount of his losings. He would also advise him to go away, and to tempt fortune no more that night against a run of bad luck; and he would prescribe for him, mix and administer, a restorative in whisky-and-water, on the strength of which the patient would go straight home, and

go to bed, and feel no pangs of remorse and terror until the morning. Or, if one of the members was not despairing, but only reckless, he would lend him money to go on with, taking a note of acknowledgment in return. He was so benevolent that his pocket-book was stuffed with these notes.

It was not known how the Count made the club pay. Perhaps the notes of acknowledgment for money lent included interest; perhaps he steadily won; if he did, it was clearly only by those games, such as *écarté*, which require some skill. But no one knew.

This evening, it might have been remarked that the Count was a good deal engaged in watching Dick's play. He observed two or three things. When Dick won he put his winnings into his pocket without a word or a sign of satisfaction. When he lost he saw the stake raked up without the least emotion. Further, he observed that Dick lost nearly every time. The luck was dead against him from the beginning. And this circumstance afforded him a certain satisfaction, but why one could hardly explain.

The evening went on; the windows were thrown wide open. But the air grew intolerably close and heavy; the players were more serious and more silent. No one, except Daffodil, laughed, and then the others turned upon him looks of reproach and wonder. Those who had left the table sat moodily without, thinking over their losses or whispering with the Count; and at the small tables there was heard the continued cries of "King—Vole—Trick—More cards—Play," in the quick, decided tones of those who play for money and play quickly.

At ten o'clock Dick rose from the table and laid his hand upon his friend's shoulder.

"Come," he whispered; "they will be expecting you at home."

The boy rose unwillingly. He was winning, and for the first time in his life his pocket was heavy with silver. But Dick dragged him from the table.

"My young friends," said the Count, as they left the table, "you leave us too early. But perhaps it is best to be home in good time. I hope you have not lost?"

He spoke very good English, but with a slightly foreign accent, and he spoke as if he really did take the deepest interest in their fortune.

"As for me," cried Daffodil eagerly,

"I've won a pot. Look here!" He pulled out a handful of shillings. "It's glorious!"

The Count laughed encouragingly.

"Good," he said; "very good! Luck is always with the boys. At your age I should have broken all the banks. Come again soon. I love to see the boys win. And you, friend Richard?"

"It doesn't matter to anyone except myself," Dick replied gloomily, "whether I win or lose."

"He is silent," said the Count. "I watch him at his play. When the others laugh or when they curse, he is silent. No one can tell from his face whether he has won or lost. A good player should be silent. Will you drink before you go?"

Daffodil went to the bar and had a drink; Dick refused.

"Do you want another advance, my friend?" asked the Count.

Dick shook his head, but with uncertainty.

"What is the good?" he asked. "My infernal luck follows me every night. I'm cleaned out again."

"Dear me! I am very sorry. Let me see your account. You have given me three cheques, each for twelve pounds. They were passed"—he glanced quickly at Dick's face—"without question."

"Why the devil should they be questioned?" Dick asked.

"Ah, my friend, yours is the face for the gambler. You can keep your countenance, whatever happens. It is a great gift. Steady eyes—look me in the face—full, steady eyes, and fingers"—he took Dick's hand in his, and squeezed the fingers critically—"fingers that are sensitive and quick. Sometimes I think that fingers are alive. Why, if a devil was to enter into one of these fingers, and persuade it to—well, to imitate another person's handwriting—"

"What do you mean?" asked Dick.

"Steady eyes—steady eyes! Why, that the finger would imitate that writing to perfection. Well, as to our account. You owe me, my young friend, twenty-four pounds. Shall I make you another advance? Well, come here to-morrow morning at eleven. Can you spare the time? Come! We shall be quite alone, and I have something to say. Steady eyes, delicate fingers, hard and cold face. These are the gifts of the true gambler."

"What then?" said Dick.

"What, indeed! I fear they are gifts

which may be wasted. Some day, when you are in trouble—some day, when you want money——"

"I always want money."

"You are in trouble also, my friend; I read trouble in your face." He dropped his voice to a whisper—a soft, friendly, murmurous whisper. "You are in trouble now. Confide in me. Those three cheques, now——"

"No, no! The cheques are all right, I tell you. Why do you keep harping upon the cheques?"

"I rejoice to hear it; I was afraid you might have been deceived. But you are in trouble."

"I didn't say that; I said I wanted money. If you can teach me how to make it—— But you can't, else you would make it for yourself. Why should you teach me?"

The Count looked at his mutilated hand.

"I could make it for myself once, but I am—I am old, perhaps. I know how it is to be made, easily, by handfuls, and I can teach you how to do it, too."

"Nobody ever gives anything. What am I to pay for the knowledge?"

"Come to-morrow, and I will tell you what you are to pay. Come here at eleven o'clock, when we shall be quite alone, and—— Ah, here is my new friend. My dear boy, I rejoice when my young friends win. It is our turn to lose. We are the old boys. The world of pleasure is all for the young. Come here and win more—win all we have! Then go and spend your money gaily. There are plenty of pretty girls who love boys with money. Go—sing—love—dance—drink! Then come here again and make more money. Happy boy—happy youth!"

"Come along, Dick," said Daffodil, laughing. "I have won fifty shillings, at least. Hooray! What a splendid game it is!"

CHAPTER VI. THE TEMPTATION.

THE soft voice of the man, his measured speech, his calmly prophetic assurance that Trouble was on the way, affected Dick Murrige at this juncture of his affairs very disagreeably. He could know nothing. Yet he spoke as if he knew.

For now the Trouble was actually come. In a few days his father would expect something from him: a Report, a Clue, a Theory—something which might be followed up. If there was nothing, he would himself take up the Case. "Come to me,"

said the Count, "when the Trouble falls upon you. Come to me to-morrow, and let us talk."

He kept that appointment; he found the Count in the Club-room, which, by day, with its tables put together and covered with a green baize cloth, looked like a Board Room, or a Room for the Coroner and the Jury, or, at least, like a Room for a Friendly Lead.

"So," said the Count, "you are here. I expected you. Has the Trouble come?"

"There is no Trouble coming," Dick replied.

"It will come very soon if it has not already come. However, let us talk business. You owe me twenty-four pounds. You have borrowed from time to time sixty pounds, and you have paid me in three cheques thirty-six pounds. You want to borrow more. Last night you lost ten pounds or thereabouts."

"How do you know?"

"I watched you all the evening. That is simple, is it not? Do you wish to borrow more money?"

Dick made no reply. He had lost more than ten pounds out of the cheque which Daffodil cashed for him—there was, in fact, half-a-crown left. Half-a-crown out of twelve pounds!

"All the young men who come here fall into Trouble, sooner or later, my dear Richard. I have seen your Trouble coming for a long time. What do you expect? You want to enjoy life. Very well then. Nature says that those who enjoy life must have money. It is reasonable. Those who have money are kings. Those who have none are slaves. If you win you spend your winnings on your pleasures. If you lose, you—well, you get into Trouble."

"I never do win," said Dick.

"My friend, listen carefully." The Count sat down and drew his chair quite close to Dick. "I have watched you for many nights. I say to myself, 'I want a pupil. Here is one who may be a credit to me.' Very good; as for the others I let them go. They may help themselves; but I am willing to help you. For you are different. I have found that you are hard and you are brave; you have no foolish, soft heart, and you have fingers—beautiful fingers, delicate, full of sense and life, which can be taught to handle cards."

"What do you mean?" Dick cried, with the feeling of attraction which a butterfly feels towards the candle.

The first lesson was the most wonderful thing which Dick ever learned. Yet it was a very small thing; nothing but a simple method of turning up the king whenever he was wanted, and a simple explanation of the fact that in professional gambling the outsider plays with the man who knows how to turn up the king, and therefore must, in the long run, lose.

"Come again to-morrow," said the Count; "meanwhile practise. Oh, I can teach you! But this is nothing. Understand that what you have learned to-day is only the very beginning of the Art—the first elements. Persevere, my son, and I will place an unheard-of fortune in your hands."

"What am I to give you for it?"

"That you will presently discover. I shall not teach you much, you may be sure, unless we understand each other."

The lesson lasted until about three o'clock. It was so strange and so delightful that the young man actually forgot the Trouble. That came back to him the moment he left the house.

It was Friday. He spent the afternoon thinking. He called it thinking. In reality it was putting before himself in lively imagination all the terrors of the situation. In the evening he went to the club. The Count lent him three pounds, and he won a small sum. But how could he hope to win back all he owed, and if he did, how would that help him with those cheques?

On Saturday morning he spent another hour or two with the Count, and learned more. He now understood for the first time, that he who plays at a public table has to do with a man who must win as often as he pleases, or as often as he dares, because he can do what he likes with the cards. For some reason of his own, the Count was teaching him the secrets of the cards. The Saturday afternoon he spent in "thinking" as before. And on Saturday evening he went again to the club, and again he won; but not much. On Sunday morning he awoke full of apprehension. Four more days; he must invent or make up something which would keep his father quiet. He was so full of fears that he resolved to tell everything to Calista.

It has been seen that he told her nothing.

The reason was, partly that he bethought him, on the way, of the pain and shame with which she would hear his story; and partly because, as he went on the top

of an omnibus from Camden Town to the Mansion House, and again from the Mansion House down the Commercial Road, there went with him a Voice. There may have been Something belonging to the Voice, a disembodied Spirit, a Demon, an Afreet—I know not what. But he heard the Voice, and he did not see the Afreet.

Said the Voice: "To-day is Sunday. You have four days—only four days. What can you make up that will satisfy your father on Thursday morning? Four days only left. If you go empty-handed he will himself take up the Case. If he does he will get to the bottom of that Case somehow or other, before he lets it go. As for the Count, you can keep him quiet. He wants you for some purpose of his own; he will teach you all he knows, and you can buy his silence. Nobody can prove that he presented the cheques unless he comes forward. He is the only dangerous one of the three. But you must invent something—you must say something."

He could think of nothing. He was ready with no explanation, report, result, or anything at all. In this nagging, uncomfortable manner the Voice went on all the way from Camden Town to Shadwell High Street, which is, as the crow flies, four miles and a half.

Then while Calista was talking to him, the Voice began again: "It lies between you and Norah. It must have been either you or Norah. One of you two did it. If you are not suspected she must be." Well, he, for his part, would not be suspected if he could avoid it by any means.

This was the reason why he spoke in so strange a fashion to Calista about what would happen. He was answering, though she did not know it, this Voice which she could not hear.

He left the Hospital, and got back to the early Sunday dinner at two. His father, for once, was almost genial, and talked freely with his son, which was unusual with him. His success in the matter of the Clonsilla inheritance pleased him. He was a landed gentleman; he had an estate in Ireland and another in England; he spoke of the land as one who has a stake in the country, and pointed out to his son that he was now an Heir and must acquire a knowledge somewhere of the Law as regards land. This was all very well; but he proceeded to talk of the robbery, and of the care with which he himself would tackle the Case if he had the

time, or if he was obliged to take it into hand. This kind of talk made his son writhe.

After dinner, Mr. Murrige, on Sundays, always had a bottle of port. His son took one glass, and he himself drank the rest of the bottle. With each glass he became more pleased with his cleverness in outwitting the Doctor, and more eager for revenge in the matter of the robbery, so that he mixed up his own astuteness with the craft of the forger—his ducats with his acres.

"Find him, Dick. Find him for me—make haste!"

"I am doing the best I can," said Dick. "Don't hurry a man."

"Have you got a Clue yet?" his father asked.

"Don't ask me anything. You gave me a week. I am not going to tell you anything before Thursday morning."

"Quite right, Dick. Nothing could be better. I hate prattling before a Case is ready. But there is no harm in a word of advice. Now, if I had the conduct of the Case, I should advertise a substantial reward for the discovery of the three persons who presented the cheques; once find them and the thing is done. To be sure, there may be a Ring of them—one to forge the cheques, one to steal the cheque-books, and one to present them, and they would stand by each other. I wonder Bank-clerks haven't made a Ring before now. They might use it merrily for a time. But I don't think there is a Ring, Dick. The cheques have been taken out of the book, and given to someone who has copied my signature, and got the cheques cashed by people he knew. Now, one of them is a foreigner, old, and grey-headed, and wanting a forefinger on the right hand—wanting a forefinger, Dick. There can't be many men in London answering to that description, can there? Very well, that's my idea. You will act on it or not, as you please. But find him, Dick; let me put him in the Dock. Let me see him going off to his seven years. It begins with a year on a plank, I believe, and solitary confinement on bread-and-water or skilly. The Law is a righteous law which condemns one who steals hard-earned money to solitary confinement and a plank bed. But he ought to be hanged, Dick. Nothing but hanging will meet the merits of the Case."

Presently Dick escaped, and wandered about the streets of Camden Town. One

thing he clearly perceived must be done at any cost—he must keep his father from taking up the Case.

To him who thinks long enough there cometh at the last a suggestion. To Dick it seemed to come from without. It was a truly villainous and disgraceful suggestion, black as Erebus, crafty as the Serpent, and cowardly as the Skunk. It had been whispered in his ear at the Hospital. Now it was whispered again.

"You must accuse someone. It is your only chance. If you acknowledge that you have failed, your father will immediately take up the Case himself. He will advertise and offer a reward. He is quite sure to find out the truth. You must accuse someone. Whom will you accuse?"

"It must be someone who has access to the office; someone who knows your father's habits in drawing cheques; someone who would get at his signature easily."

"No. Not the office-boy. There cannot be a proof or a shadow of proof against the office-boy. Who else comes to the office?" Dick waited while that question was put to him a hundred times. "Who else but Norah? There is no other. Norah Cronan."

Dick Murrige had known this girl all his life. When she was five and he eight, they played together. When she was ten and he thirteen he teased and bullied her after the manner of boys; when she was sixteen and he nineteen he began to perceive that she was beautiful; only a fortnight before he had told her that he loved her. And now he could harbour the thought of accusing her in order to save himself. Said the Voice in his ear:

"The first rule of life is self-preservation. Before that everything must give way. A man must save himself at any sacrifice. Honour, Love, Friendship, Truth—what are they? Shadows. The first thing is self-preservation."

His father had taught him this precept a hundred times. What was it he was going to do but to preserve himself?

How would his father take it? Why, that made the thing all the more easy. She was, if anyone, a favourite with him. He trusted her more than any other person in the world—more than his own son. If he interested himself or cared about anyone it was about this clever, quick, and industrious girl-clerk, who for seventy-five pounds a year did the work of two men-clerks at double the salary. If his father could only be persuaded that it was Norah

he would probably say nothing more about it. He would forgive her, and all would go on as before. Here Dick was wrong. Mr. Murridge and men who, like him, trust few, and those not unreservedly, are far more dangerous if they are betrayed than men who trust lightly and easily.

He thought over this villainy all the evening. The longer he thought of it the more easy and the more likely it appeared. He saw a way of making the charge plausible and possible. He made up his mind what he would do and how he would do it. At the same time he resolved to keep on with the Count. It might be well, in case things turned out badly, to listen to the proposals, at which he kept hinting, with promises of wealth unbounded.

It was past ten when he went home. He took his candle, and, without seeing his father, went straight to his own room.

"Of course," he said, "I would not have her tried, or sent to prison, or anything. It will be quite enough for my father to think she's done it. They can't send her to prison, or anyone else, if there are no forgeries to convict with." Then suddenly came a really brilliant idea. "They must have a forgery to go upon. Suppose a man says that a cheque was cashed which he did not draw, very well then, where is your cheque? Produce your cheque." He did produce a little heap of cheques and a cheque-book. He placed them in the fireplace; he struck a match; and he saw them quickly consume into ashes.

"There," he said, "where's your proof, now? Where is your forgery? The worst that can happen to Norah, now, when she says I gave her the cheque, is not to be believed. It's all right now. They can't prove anything."

He was so pleased, pacified, and easy after this act of decision, that he went to bed, and for the first time for many weeks slept soundly, and without any apprehensions, nightmares, or dreadful dreams.

CHAPTER VII. DOWN WITH THE LANDLORDS.

"We have now," said Uncle Joseph, regarding his first glass of gin-and-water with discontented looks—"we have now, Maria, been members of the Peerage—actually of the Peerage—the Peerage of the Realm for nearly a week. Yet I see no change."

"No one has called," said her Ladyship. "I have put on my best gown every night.

But no one has thought fit to take the least notice of us."

"Where is the Coronet? Where are the Robes? Where is the Star? Where is the Collar?"

The Doctor silently filled his pipe and went on reading his evening paper, taking no notice of these complaints. Yet it did strike him as strange that a man should succeed to a Peerage with so little fuss.

"No message from the Queen," Uncle Joseph continued; "no officer of the House of Lords with congratulations from that august Body; no communications from Provincial Grand Lodge; no deputations from a loyal tenantry; no ringing of bells. Maria, in the whole course of my experience among the titled classes I never before saw such a miserable Succession."

"Miserable, indeed," said her ladyship.

"The reason," continued Uncle Joseph, "is not difficult to find. They are waiting, Maria, for the Banquet. How can a noble Lord succeed without a Banquet? You can't do anything without it. Why, if you initiate a little City clerk, you have a Banquet over it. If you raise a man to the dazzling height of Thirty-Third, you must celebrate the occasion with a Banquet. And here we succeed to the rank of Viscount, and not even a bottle of champagne. Gin-and-water, in the house of the Right Honourable the Viscount Clonsilla!"

There was a full attendance of the House, so to speak. The Honourable Hyacinth was present; the Honourable Norah, with Mr. Hugh Aquila, had just returned from an evening walk among the leafy groves of Camden Town's one square; the Honourable Terry, Larry, and Pat were, as usual, quarrelling over a draught-board.

"Well, my dear," said the Doctor at last, "what did you expect?"

"I expected Recognition. I thought that our brother Peers would call upon us."

"What have we received, Maria?" said Uncle Joseph. "The outstretched hand of Brotherhood? Not at all. Cold neglect."

"We may belong to the Irish peerage," said the Doctor, "but, remember, if you please, that I am still, and am likely to remain to the end of the Chapter, a General Practitioner, with a large practice and a small income, of Camden Town. It will be a proud distinction, no doubt, to reflect that we are the only titled people in Camden Town. Well, we must be contented with

the pride. You may add to the Alderman's robe, my dear, your coronet, when it comes along."

"We ought," said Uncle Joseph firmly, "to assert ourselves. There ought to be a Banquet."

"At the funeral to-day," the Doctor continued, "there was not a single mourner except myself, and Daff, and Hugh who went with us. Not one. The old Lord seems to have outlived all his friends. He left no will, so that all the property, whatever it is, entailed or not, should have come to me, but for an accidental circumstance which you ought to learn at once."

"As the old Lord is buried," said Uncle Joseph, "the time has come for action; of course it would have been unseemly to rejoice before the funeral. Now, if my advice is thought to be worth anything in this family—the advice of a man who has shaken hands familiarly, yet respectfully, with Earls, and sat next to a Prince at a Banquet—is, that we should, without any delay, issue invitations to a large number of our noble and illustrious brother Peers for a Banquet in robes and coronets at the Freemasons' or the Criterion. I will myself superintend the Banquet, inspect the menu—at this time of year, what with lamb, duckling, green peas, salmon, white-bait, turtle, young potatoes, early apricots and strawberries, the Banquet will be unusually choice—choice and toothsome. As for the champagne—ah!" he gasped and drank off the whole glass of gin-and-water, "I will order it. Do not be in anxiety about the champagne, Maria. It shall be my care. When the Banquet is over, your health—you will be in the chair, Doctor—shall be taken after the loyal toasts. I will myself respond for the Craft. Then we will give up this house, which is mean for a Viscount's Town Residence, and we will move to a Mansion in the West, where Maria can take that place in Society which she was born to adorn."

He spoke so confidently, with so much enthusiasm, that her Ladyship murmured, and even Norah was carried away with the thought of the Family greatness. A large house in the West End, with nothing for her father to do, and Society—though it is not certain how she understood that word—seemed fitting accompaniments to a Title.

The Doctor listened gravely. Then he laughed.

"It is too ridiculous," he said. "I am Viscount Clonsilla. You, my dear, are

Lady Clonsilla. All you boys and girls are Honourables. And, except for your mother's money, there isn't a penny in the world for any of us. What do you say, Hugh?"

"I should let the Title fall into abeyance," said Hugh. "I don't know why, but a title, without land or money, seems contemptible. I should give it up."

"Never!" said Uncle Joseph, with decision. "Give up a Title? Give up a thing that thousands are envying and longing after? Throw away a Title? You must be mad, young man. Actually refuse to enjoy your Title? You might as well go to a Banquet and pass the champagne. But it shows your ignorance. You have never been among Lords and Honourables. You don't know, young man—you cannot know, what I mean. You are only a young Doctor. Be humble. Don't presume to advise, sir, on matters connected with Rank and Society."

"I know what science means," said Hugh; "and that's enough for me. Title! Who would not rather make a name for himself than bear a Title?"

"Let us look at the thing practically, children," said the Doctor. "I shall never make a name for myself, unless I make a name as a great Donkey. As for the Title, then. If Rank allows me to enlarge my practice and makes a better class of patients send for me, and enables me to ride in a carriage instead of trudging along the streets, and to double all the bills, and to give up making up my own medicines, and to have a balance at the bank, why then I will gladly sport the Title. But if it only makes us ridiculous, let us give it up. A Coronet on the door of a surgery, where medicines are made up by the noble Lord within, does seem ridiculous, doesn't it?"

Uncle Joseph shook his head.

"Rank," he said, "can never be ridiculous. But, if you feel it that way, follow my advice: give up the surgery, take a house at the West End, and go into Society."

The Doctor shook his head impatiently.

"Let the thing slide," said Hugh. "What do you think, Norah?"

"I shall always be glad, whatever happens, to think that my father can be a Viscount if he pleases. Of course, at first I thought there must be a great fortune with it. I always thought that Peers were very rich men, and I thought it would be delightful to see him resting a little from

his hard work, and not to be afraid any more of the night-bell."

The Doctor kissed his daughter.

"Children," he said, "I have a confession to make. Listen, now. Your father has been a terrible Donkey!"

"If I had been consulted——" said Uncle Joseph.

"No doubt," the Doctor interrupted him. "Now hear my tale. Three years ago, I happened to be very much in want of money. The practice had been very bad, as far as paying patients go. I was so troubled for money that I consulted Mr. Murrige as to the best way of getting a loan. I then learned, for the first time in my life, that my second cousinship to an Irish Lord might be turned into money. Mr. Murrige thought it was worth exactly two hundred pounds, and for the two hundred pounds, without which I could not have sent you, Daff, to University, I sold my reversion."

"There was some estate, then?" said Hugh curiously. "I understood there was nothing."

"There was this small estate of—I do not know how many acres, and I do not know what it is worth, or whether the tenants have paid any rent."

"And Mr. Murrige—Dick's father—bought your reversion?" said Hugh. "It seems a very strange thing for him to do."

"His business lies among genealogies and family histories," said the Doctor. "He found out what I ought to have learned before signing and selling—that my chances were really very good indeed—almost a certainty."

"Then," said Hugh, "Mr. Murrige thinks he is going to be the landlord, I suppose?"

"Certainly; he has bought me out."

"Father," said Norah, "you did it for the best. It was for us—for Daff—that you took the money. What does it matter? Let us all go on just as before. Hugh won't mind; will you, Hugh?"

"No, I don't mind, Norah. But I venture to make a little prophecy, Doctor. Mr. Murrige will never be owner of the Clonsilla estates, even if they consist of nothing but a four-acre field of bog. He thinks he has got them, but he may find that he has overreached himself."

"If I were consulted," said Uncle Joseph, "I should invite the tenants to a——"

Again he was interrupted. This time it was the last post of the day, which brought

a letter in a great blue envelope, addressed in a great sprawling hand, as if written with a pitchfork: "For the Honorable Lord Viscount Clonsilla, somewhere in London."

"It is the first Recognition of Rank," said her Ladyship. "Open it and read it quickly. Perhaps it is a missive from the Queen—a missive of congratulation."

"Or an invitation from the Lord Chancellor," said Uncle Joseph. "A summons, no doubt, to a Banquet on the Woolsack."

The Doctor opened it curiously. It did not look, somehow, like an Invitation. It was more like a Bill. The writing of the letter was even worse, more sprawling, than that of the address.

"MY LORD," the letter ran, "this is to warn you that the first man evicted from his holding will be the signal for your Bloody End. No rents. No eviction. Remember Lord Mountmorres. We will have Vengeance. Blood and Revenge. You shall die. Look at the picture. Think of the Whiteboys and the Invincibles. Death! Death! Death! Every man has got his gun, and we are sworn. Death! Death! Blood and Death! Down with Landlords!"

And at the bottom, rudely designed, were a coffin, a gun, a skull, effectively and feelingly delineated, and two cross-bones copied from the churchyard.

The Doctor handed this cheerful epistle to his wife with a laugh; but no one, even in the secure retreat of a fastness of Camden Town, quite likes to have a letter sent to him with a promise of murder if he dares to enforce his rights, and the picture of a coffin and a skull.

"Murrige, I suppose, has sent them all notices to pay up," he said. "This is a cheerful situation. He is to get the rents, and I am to get the credit for them—in bullets. I don't think this was in the agreement."

"At all events," said Hugh, "they don't know where to find you. 'Somewhere in London' is a little too vague even for an evicted Irish tenant."

"As their landlord," said Uncle Joseph, "you should gain their loyalty—by a Banquet."

"Well, children," the Doctor continued, disregarding this suggestion, "you have now heard the whole story. What are we to do? Shall I alter the plate on the door? Shall I attend my patients, at anything I can get a visit, in my coronet? Shall we invite the landlord shooters to Camden Town? What do you say, Daff?"

"Well," said the medical student, "as there is no money, there will be no fun with the Title."

"We will go on," said Norah, "just as before. Only, of course, with a little more pride. You are pleased, Hugh, are you not, that you are engaged to a real lady by birth, and the daughter of a Viscount, if he chooses to take the Title? It is always best to belong to a good family."

"Yes," said the Doctor; "Creeping Bob was——"

"Hush!" said Norah. "I will not hear any stories about my great-great-grandfather. There are always scandals in every old family. I prefer to believe that they have all been the soul of honour—every one of them."

"You are disappointed, my dear." The Doctor turned to his wife.

"Oh!" she cried, bursting into tears, with the revolutionary letter in her hand, "if we are to be murdered in our beds, and all for nothing, with no money, and no land, let us say no more about it. But it is a cruel thing to give up your Rank. And just as the tradespeople are beginning to find it out. Why, this morning the butcher congratulated me. He had just heard it, he said. And he put a penny a pound more upon the beef."

"Well," said the Doctor, "that is settled, then. The Title is extinct. My children, you will, however, continue to be as Honourable as you can."

Before Hugh went to bed that night he read over again a letter which he had received that morning from his mother. This was the conclusion:

"And now, my dear boy, you know the whole. If you are desirous of acting before the doctor allows me to travel, go to my solicitors, Messrs. Ongar and Greensted, of Lincoln's Inn Fields. They have the papers and know my secret. If it is not necessary, wait until my arrival. I expect to be released in a week or so, if things go well. Do not, however, move in the matter without consulting them, and I do not think it is prudent to tell anyone—even Norah—until you have consulted them. It is vexatious to conceal anything from her. Still, have patience for a week."

"I don't think," said Hugh, "that the Doctor will mind much. Murridge, I take it, will be astonished."

CHAPTER VIII. THE GRAVE OF HONOUR.

LET this chapter be printed within a deep black border. Let it be in mourning.

Let it be illustrated with all the emblems which can be gathered together of disgrace and dishonour. The Valley of Tophet, with its baleful fires, may furnish a frontispiece—there may be funereal cypress, henbane, deadly nightshade, and the poisonous flowers of marsh and ditch may adorn the corners of its pages. There should be a drawing of Adam turned out of Paradise, with portraits of all the most celebrated renegades, turncoats, and traitors, and the most eminent Sneaks, in history. For a man may do many things wicked and base, and yet find forgiveness; he may drag his name in the dust, and trample on his self-respect, and give a rein to his passion, and yet be welcomed back into the world of honourable men. But the thing which Dick Murridge did was one which can never be forgiven him in this world, save by the girl to whom he did this wrong. And she, I think, has forgiven him already.

He did it on the Tuesday morning, two days before his week expired. He spent the whole of Monday in putting his Case upon paper in the form of a Report. On Tuesday he went into town before his father, and on his arrival followed him into the inner office, with a roll of paper in his hand.

"I think, sir," he said, "that I have done all I can in this matter. I have put down on paper what I have to tell you—for your private information."

"Do you mean that you have found the thief and forger?"

"I think I have."

"Think! I want you to be sure. And what do you mean by talking of my private information? If you've got the man, I'll soon show you how private I will keep the information."

"If you will read these papers——"

"Afterwards. Tell me who did it."

"Well, then. It was—none other—than—your private clerk—Norah Cronan."

Dick looked his father steadily in the face, speaking slowly and deliberately.

"I don't believe it!"

Mr. Murridge sprang to his feet and banged the table with his fist.

"Read these papers, then."

"Dick, I don't believe it! The thing is impossible! Where are your proofs?"

"Read these papers."

"Norah Cronan! It cannot be!"

Dick smiled, as one who is on a rock of certainty and can afford to smile.

"What have you always told me, sir? Never trust anybody. Every man is for

himself. Every man has his price. Every body thinks of nothing but himself. Very well, then. Remember these maxims before you say that anything is impossible. If you will read these papers, you will find——"

"Read the paper yourself. Let me know all that you can prove. Read the paper yourself. Quick!"

He threw himself into a chair and waited with angry light in his eye.

Everything happens in the way we least expect. Dick had made up his mind that he would lay the paper upon the table with solemnity suitable to the occasion, and then retire, leaving the document to produce its natural effect. He further calculated that, after reading the paper, his father would most likely send for him, and enjoin him to say nothing more about the matter. That, at least, was what he hoped. But he had not expected to be asked to read the paper aloud, and he naturally hesitated. He had committed to writing an Enormous Lie, or, rather, a Chain and Series of Lies—all strong, massive, well-connected, forming together a tale which, for cowardice and meanness, never had an equal since the days when men first learned to tell lies, swop yarns, invent excuses, and pass on the blame. Certainly, it would never have a superior. To write such a thing, however, was one thing—to read it calmly and coldly was another.

When Dick had once made up his mind that escape was only possible by one method, he gave his whole thought, and devoted the greatest possible pains to make the narrative complete in all its parts, and impregnable at every point. He wrote and re-wrote every single sentence half-a-dozen times; he read it over and over again; he examined the document critically; he put himself in the place of a hostile and suspicious critic; he even read it aloud, which is the very best way possible of testing the strength of such a document, whether from the credible and the probable, or from the plausible and persuasive, or from the purely literary point of view. He was not greatly skilled, as may be supposed, in Fiction considered as a Fine Art, which is, perhaps, the reason why he was quite satisfied in his own mind with his statement, looked at from any point of view.

"Read it," his father repeated. "Let me hear what you have found. If it is true——"

He stopped, because he knew not what he should do if it were true.

The young man hesitated no longer. With perfectly steady eyes, which met his father's fearlessly and frankly, and with brazen front, and with clear, unhesitating voice, he read the Thing he had made up.

"Before I begin this Statement"—the words formed part of the Narrative—"I wish to explain that nothing but your express command that I should investigate the Case for you would have induced me to write down what I know about it. You will consider it as, in part, a Confession."

Mr. Murridge looked up sharply and suspiciously.

"Yes, as you will presently see," Dick repeated, answering that glance, "a Confession. When the duty of taking up and investigating this case was laid upon me, my lips, which would otherwise have remained shut, as a point of honour, were opened. If I did not obey your command to the fullest extent, innocent persons might be suspected and even be punished. I have, therefore, resolved upon telling you all that I know, whatever happens. And since I must write down the Truth, I pray that no further action may be taken in the Case, and that this most deplorable business may be forgotten and dropped, never to be mentioned again."

"What the Devil do you mean by that?" his father cried. "The business forgotten! The matter allowed to drop! Do I look like the man to forget such a thing? No further action, indeed! Wait, you shall see what further action I shall take."

Dick did not stop to press this petition for mercy.

"It is now four weeks," he continued, reading from the paper, "since I had the misfortune—it was a great misfortune to me, and I am very sorry that it happened—to observe, quite accidentally, a certain suspicious circumstance which took place in your own office. This circumstance caused me the greatest uneasiness and suspicion at the time, and has filled me with anxiety ever since. Of course, as you will immediately understand, directly you spoke to me last week my suspicions turned to certainty. I was, as usual, in the outer office, and I had nothing to do but to sit and wait for any work which might be sent out. The time was a quarter-past two. You were gone out to your dinner, and the boy was gone to his. There was, therefore, no one at all in the place except myself. Before you went out you locked

up your safe with your papers in it. I know that, because, as you passed through the outer door, you dropped the keys into your pocket. You left your own door wide open. A few minutes afterwards, to my astonishment, Norah Cronan came in. 'Is your father in?' she asked in a whisper. I asked her if she knew what time it was, and whether she expected a regular man like you to be in at a quarter-past two. She made no reply, but went into your office very quickly and shut the door. As she passed me I remarked that her face was red and her eyes looked swollen, as if she had been crying. I dare say you yourself have noticed that, for some time past, she has been out of spirits?"

Mr. Murrudge grunted; but what he meant is not known.

"She shut the door, but, as sometimes happens, the lock did not catch, and the door stood ajar. From the place where I was sitting I could see through the door, and could catch something of what she was about. I was not curious, but I looked, and I observed that she was tearing something out of a book. This was such a strange thing to do, that it caught my eye. Why should she come to your office, when you were out, in order to tear leaves out of a book? It certainly seemed to be a book of some kind, but from my place I was quite unable to see what it was, or why she was tearing it up. Then she folded the leaves very carefully, and, so far as I could see, put them in her pocket. After a few minutes she came out again. Of course I was by this time very curious indeed, but I asked no questions. A man does not like to seem curious about a thing which he has seen, so to speak, through a keyhole. I noticed, however, that her breath was quick, and that her hand trembled. And she said a very strange thing to me. 'Dick,' she said, 'when your father comes back, do not tell him that I came here. I only came to get something—something which I forgot this morning, nothing of any importance.' She stammered a great deal while she said this. I told her that it was no business of mine whether she came or whether she stayed away, because I had nothing to do with her or her work. Then she laid her hand on my shoulder, and looked into my face. 'But promise, Dick,' she said. 'You see we are such old friends, you and I, and Daff is your bosom friend. We ought to be able to depend on you. Promise, dear Dick; say that you will never tell your father

that I came to his office any day when he was out of it.' I naturally promised. And she went away. As soon as she was gone I went into your office to find out what she had been tearing, if I could, being still curious, and not best satisfied with myself for having made that promise. There were two or three great books on the table, your genealogical books. But she would not be likely to tear any of the leaves out of them, because they are not the only copies. I looked about, therefore, and presently, poked away under some papers, I found your cheque-book lying on the table. I took it up and examined it. I do not know why, because I had no suspicion of this kind of thing. What was my astonishment to discover that six of the cheques had been taken out of the book! Six; they were scattered here and there, not taken out in a lump. This, of course, was in order to lessen the chance of immediate discovery. I never before knew that you were in the habit of leaving your cheque-book out. This was the thing that I found. It was afterwards, when I began to think about it, that I connected the leaves torn out of the book, and so carefully folded, with the cheque-book."

Mr. Murrudge's face, which had been at first expectant and interested, was now as black as Erebus.

"Go on," he said. "Get on faster. Let us finish with this."

"I returned to my desk, and considered what was best to be done. Of course—I admit this freely—I ought to have gone directly to you and informed you of my discovery. In not doing this I committed a great error of judgment, as well as a breach of duty. For I should have considered that, when the absence of the cheques was discovered, it would be remembered that there were only two persons—not counting the office-boy—who had access to your office. These were Norah and myself. One of us must have taken them."

"Why, no," said Mr. Murrudge. "For it cannot be proved that no one came into this office except you two. There is the office-boy; there is the housekeeper; there are any number of people whom the housekeeper may have admitted on the Sunday or in the evening; there is nothing to prove when I left my cheque-book lying about. It might have been lying on the table all night, or from Saturday until Monday. I cannot admit that the thing lies between you and Norah Cronan."

"Very well, sir; I am glad you think that it may lie outside us. That, however, was how I put it to myself, I confess."

"You ought to have told me at once. You find my cheque-book with six cheques torn out, and you did not tell me. Were you mad?"

"Perhaps; but remember that I only saw leaves, or what seemed to be leaves, torn out and folded up. It was not till afterwards, I repeat, that I suspected Norah of stealing cheques. It was not till you told me of your loss that I really connected her with those cheques."

"You ought to have told me directly you heard of the loss."

"I confess, again, that I ought to have told you. Well, I did not. That is all I can say. First, I had passed my word to Norah that I would not mention her visit. Next, I was confused and bewildered on her account, and then I was afraid of you."

"Oh, afraid of me!"

"Yes, afraid of you. Norah has been your favourite always. You give her the confidential work, and me the office drudgery. I thought you would not believe me. Perhaps I hoped that she would get off altogether. But when you placed the whole Case in my hands, the first thing that forced itself upon me was that the forgery must have been committed by means of these very missing cheques."

"Well, the numbers prove that."

"So that nothing was left to me but to confess what I knew, and to follow up that fact as a clue."

Dick sighed heavily.

"I wish the task had been entrusted to another man. First I thought of going to Calista and telling her everything. But Norah is her sister, so that it seemed best to tell you all myself. Perhaps Calista may be spared the pain of ever learning this dreadful thing. As for the actual forger, I cannot yet speak. But I have proofs as to the presentation of two cheques out of the five."

"Proofs? Nothing but the clearest proofs will satisfy me!"

"You shall be satisfied, then. What do you think of this for one proof? The girl described by the Bank Clerk as having presented one of the cheques was Norah herself. For proof send for the clerk when she is here. He will be able to identify her, I dare say. That is my first proof. Now for the second: The young gentleman who presented and cashed the cheque last Thursday, at one o'clock, was no other

than her brother, young Hyacinth Cronan—Daffodil. He must have gone to the Bank just before one o'clock, because he came here a few minutes after one, and we went out to dinner together. We went to Crosby Hall, and sat there till two. The clerk, you know, gave one o'clock as the hour. I have no doubt but he will identify Daffodil as well. It will be perfectly easy."

"The cheques may have been given to them."

"By the actual forger? Very possible. But in this case unlikely. Because who would do it for them?"

"Go on." The Case was getting blacker.

"As regards the character of Daff—I mean Hyacinth, for steadiness, I am afraid we cannot say much. He is, as you know, perhaps, at University College Hospital, and he belongs to a fast set. They play billiards, smoke together, have parties in each other's rooms, and go to theatres and music-halls—all this was strictly true, and yet—poor Daffodil!—" worse still, he goes to a gaming den. It is a place open every evening for playing baccarat, and every kind of gambling game. I dare say, when they do nothing else, they play pitch and toss. I remembered your recommendation to use every means in order to find out the truth, and I went with him. We went twice last week." This also, as we know, was literally true.

"I have also learned that he is in money difficulties." Daffodil had shown Dick a letter from his tailor intimating that something on account would be desirable. "Altogether, I think my theory will prove right—Norah took the cheques with a view to help her brother. Of course she knows very well your custom of drawing twelve-pound cheques for private purposes. Therefore she filled these up for that amount, confident that they would then pass without suspicion, and might even escape your notice. She imitated your signature; and she gave them every one to her brother, except that which she cashed herself, presumably also for him. I am quite sure she did it for her brother. Whether he knows how she got the cheques—whether he stands in with her—I cannot tell. That will be seen when he is confronted with the Bank Clerk, and charged with presenting the cheque. You will judge by what he replies to the charge."

"Has the girl a lover?"

"She has been engaged for the last week or so only."

"Who is the man?"

"His name is Hugh Aquila. He is Resident Medical Officer at the Children's Hospital. I was at school with him. But you need not enquire about him. He has got nothing to do with it."

"How do you know that?"

"Because his mother has money. Madame Aquila was a professional singer, who made money and retired from the profession. Besides, he thinks about nothing but his work. He has as much money as he wants, and he never was in debt or any trouble. Why should he stand in?"

"He is not a man who bets and gambles?"

"Not at all."

"Humph! Give me the paper. There's a nest of villainy somewhere about the place."

Dick folded it neatly, and handed it over with the air of the undertaker's man handing the gloves at a funeral.

"Of course you are prepared to swear to this statement?"

"Certainly." This with perfectly steady eyes. "Of course, I trust it will not be necessary."

"Very well. There remains the man who presented the three cheques. I have not yet laid my hands upon him. No doubt if Norah confesses, she will tell you who he is. If not, you have enough to satisfy you."

"I have enough, when I have all. Go now—or stay—where are the cheques and the cheque-book that I left in your hands?"

"They are locked up in my private drawer in the other room. I will get them." He vanished, but returned in a moment. "They are gone!" he cried. "The cheques are gone!"

"Gone!"

"They are gone! On Saturday I left them in my private drawer. Now they are gone."

"Was the drawer locked?"

"It is always locked. Here is the key which has just unlocked it. Indeed, I am sure they were in the drawer on Saturday."

Mr. Murrige went into the outer office. The private drawer contained nothing but a few unimportant papers. The drawer, indeed, might just as well have been unlocked. For the forged cheques and the cheque-book, which Dick said were left there on Saturday, had disappeared.

"Who has been in this office, boy," asked Mr. Murrige, "besides yourself, since Saturday?"

"Only Miss Cronan, sir; and Mr. Richard to-day, sir. Nobody came yesterday, sir?"

"What time did you leave the place on Saturday?"

"Not till three o'clock, sir. Miss Cronan was with you when you brought me out the letters to copy and to post."

"Norah was working with me on Saturday afternoon," said Mr. Murrige, "until four o'clock. I remember. Then she went away. I worked here alone till six. Have you a bunch of keys at all, you boy?"

"No, sir; I haven't got anything to lock up. Search me, if you like."

"Have you seen Mr. Richard's drawer standing open? I don't want to search you. What the devil should I search you for?"

"No, sir. The drawer is never open that I know of, except Mr. Richard's in his chair."

"Have you ever tried to open that drawer yourself, with a key or without?"

"No, sir. He always locks it. And I haven't got no keys. And why should I want to open Mr. Richard's drawer?"

"There's villainy somewhere." Mr. Murrige breathed hard, and put his hands in his pockets. "Villainy somewhere. I'll get to the bottom of this."

"The vanishing of the cheques," said Dick, "seems to crown the whole thing."

"What do you mean?" asked his father roughly.

Dick showed his key.

"You see, it is quite a common key. Anybody with a good big bunch of keys could open the drawer. Perhaps, even—such things do happen—when the key was turned the bolt fell back, and the drawer was open. What did you give me the cheques for? They were no use to me—not the least use."

Mr. Murrige grunted. The cheques could not, under any circumstances, have been of use to his son in his investigation. Now they were gone, perhaps lost altogether. Why, it was now become a forgery without what the French call the pieces of conviction. Who can prove a forgery when there is no document before the Court? Mr. Murrige retired to his own office, followed by his son.

"Look here, Dick," he said, "this thing is getting more complicated. I must think it over. You've done your share. Leave it to me."

"You needn't go investigating, or enquiring, or anything," said his son; "you may entirely depend on the truth of my facts. Start from them."

"Perhaps. Yes; well. I've nothing for you at the office, Dick. Go and take a holiday; amuse yourself somehow—as you like to amuse yourself. But, mind, not a word to anybody—not a syllable. Not a breath of what you've told me either to Norah or to her brother. This paper and the accusation it contains belong to me. Do you hold your tongue about the matter. Let no one suspect."

Dick desired nothing so much as complete oblivion and the burial of the whole business. He said so, in fact.

"But what shall you do next?" he asked.

"That is my business. Only hold your tongue, and leave the rest of the Case to me."

"It has come," said the office-boy, watching. "He's done something at last. He's ordered to leave the office in disgrace. I knew he would do something; and I've got something more, and I shall make him wriggle. He thinks he won't be found out. Ho! I'm a measly little devil, and she's a Sapphier. It's something against her, is it. Just you wait. The office-boy has a eye open."

Mr. Murrige went back to his own office and sat down gloomy and wrathful. He left his door wide open, and the boy, sitting at his own table, his hands on the handle of the letterpress, watched him carefully, wondering whether the time was yet arrived for him to step in. But for such a lad to "step in" before the right moment might endanger everything. Suppose if by reason of premature stepping in instead of seeing Mr. Richard wriggle, he might himself have to do all the wriggling? If he got turned out of his berth this would certainly happen to him when he went home, his father being a Fellowship Porter, and stout of arm.

All this took place at ten o'clock, the first thing in the morning. It was over by half-past ten. When, at eleven o'clock, Norah came as usual, she found her employer sitting idle. His letters were unopened, his safe was still shut, his papers were not laid out before him. The day's work was not yet commenced.

"Why!" cried Norah; "what is the matter with you to-day? Are you ill?"

Her eyes were so bright, her face so full of sunshine, her look so radiant with the happiness of youth, innocence, and love, that Mr. Murrige groaned aloud, wondering how this thing could be possible.

"Wait a moment here," he said, taking

his hat; "I will be back in a few minutes."

Norah had plenty to occupy her. She opened her black bag, spread out her papers, and put them in order, till Mr. Murrige returned, which was after five minutes; he was accompanied by a young gentleman, who, while Mr. Murrige opened his safe, and rummaged among his papers, stared at Norah rather more closely than was consistent with good manners, according to her own views.

"Here," said Mr. Murrige presently, taking his head out of the safe, "is what you want." He gave the young gentleman a paper, and followed him out of the office. "Well?" he asked in a whisper.

"That is the young lady," the clerk replied, also in a whisper.

But the office-boy heard and wondered.

"You are quite sure of it?"

"Quite sure. I would swear to her. I am certain of her identity."

Then Mr. Murrige came back and shut the door.

"Norah," he said, walking up and down the room in considerable agitation, "a very curious thing has happened."

"What is that?"

"I have been robbed."

"Oh! How dreadful! Is it much?"

"I have been robbed—treacherously robbed," he added, as if most robberies were open-handed and friendly, "of sixty pounds, by means of five forged cheques, payable to bearer."

"Oh!"

"Each was for twelve pounds. Now, listen. Three were brought to the Bank and cashed by one man—a man who spoke a foreign accent, and who can be easily identified. He presented them on the third, the sixth, and thirteenth of this month."

"Well," said Norah, "if he can be identified, you ought to be able to find him."

"One, also one of the forged cheques was presented on Friday, the fifteenth, at a quarter-past twelve, by a young lady." Mr. Murrige watched the effect of his words, and spoke very slowly. "It was a cheque for twelve pounds, payable to bearer. It was cashed by a young lady. What is the matter, Norah?" for the girl turned white, and reeled as if she was about to faint.

"Nothing. Go on. It is nothing." But she was white and frightened, and she trembled, and was fain to sit down. Norah was a bad actress.

"By a young lady who can also, if necessary, be identified. And on Thursday last, another for the same sum of twelve pounds was presented at about a quarter to one by a young gentleman whom the clerk declares he would recognise at once. He is described as a handsome boy, with light, curly hair, and an easy manner; he wears a pot-hat, and has a red tie. Well, that is nearly all we know at present. I have nothing more to tell you. Stay, one thing more. The forged cheques, with the cheque-book from which they were stolen, were all in my son's private drawer, which he keeps locked, on Saturday morning. Of that he is certain. They have now disappeared. They, too, have been stolen. My son's drawer has been broken open, and the cheques have been taken from it. Do you quite understand?"

She tried to speak, but she could not. In the young lady she recognised herself. She had, with her own hands, presented that cheque, and received gold for it; she remembered who had given her the cheque, and to whom she had given the money; more than this, in the handsome boy with the red tie she recognised her own brother Daff; not because he, too, wore a red tie, but because he had told her, talking trifles over an evening pipe, how he had cashed one of Mr. Murridge's cheques that morning, and for whom he had cashed it.

"Are you quite sure—are you positive that these two cheques, cashed by the young lady and by the boy, were forgeries? Oh, Mr. Murridge, think. It is a dreadful charge to bring against anybody. Were they really forgeries? You may have forgotten, you know. They may have been your own. How do you know for certain that they were forgeries?"

What did she mean? What on earth did she mean by talking in this way?

"They were not my own. They were forged," he repeated sternly. "I know that from the dates, and from the number of the cheques.

"Norah," he said presently, "you have been a good girl to me; a very clever and good girl you've been to me for five years. I acknowledge it—I feel it. I wish I had raised your salary before. You deserve more: you've been a very good girl. You have carried through many difficult Cases for me. I don't know what I should have done in lots of Cases without your help. This robbery distresses me. I did not think I could have been so much distressed by anything. I say it is a most distressing

thing to me." He repeated his words, and seemed at a loss how to express himself. "Now I will give you one more sign of my confidence in you—a complete proof of my confidence in you. I will put this Case, too, into your hands. Do you hear? You shall carry it through for me."

She made no sign whatever.

"I will give it to you for your own investigation. You shall find out, Norah, who took the cheques from my cheque-book, who filled them and signed them, who presented them. You shall help me to bring this villain to justice." The girl sat before him with pale cheek, and eyes down-dropped, and she trembled. Her hands trembled, her lips trembled, her shoulders trembled. "It shall be your task. Will you undertake it?"

Still she made no sign.

"It may be—I say it may be—that some excuses, what men call excuses—idle things, but they are sometimes accepted—may be found. The thing may have been done by someone to help another person in trouble. Oh, there are people so foolish and weak that they will even incur the risk of crime, and disgrace, and punishment for others. Women have been known to do such things for their prodigal lovers and their unworthy brothers. Find out, if you can, such an excuse; and when you bring me the name of the guilty person I will consider how far that excuse may avail in saving him from punishment."

"Spare me!" cried Norah. "Oh, I will do anything else that you ask me—anything else; but I cannot do this."

"Why not?"

"Because I cannot. I can give you no reason."

"You refuse to do it. Why? I don't ask you this time, Norah. I command you. If you are still to remain in my service, undertake this investigation."

"I will not. I cannot. I will rather leave your service."

"Then, before we part, read this paper. It was placed in my hands this morning by my son. He is your old friend and companion. Your brother is also his old friend and companion. Your family have all been kind to him. Yet he has been compelled to write this report for me. Read it. Think of the pain it must have given him to write it; and the pain, yes, the deep pain, it gives me to read it."

Norah read it. When she came to the place where the writer spoke of herself she read slowly, not able at first to under-

stand it. Then she cried aloud in amazement from the pain of the blow, which was like the stabbing of a sharp stiletto. But she recovered, and went on to the end. When she had quite finished it, she sunk into her chair and buried her face in her hands, sobbing and crying without restraint. The man who had told her he loved her, and had implored her to marry him one day, had done this thing the next. The boy in the outer office heard her crying, and wondered whether now the time had arrived for his own appearance.

Not yet, he thought; not yet. Above all things an opportune appearance and a dramatic effect!

"What have you to say?" asked Mr. Murridge.

"Oh, Dick, Dick!"

It was all she had to say. Presently she lifted her head and dashed away her tears, and proudly gave back the paper to Mr. Murridge.

"Well?"

"I have nothing to say," she replied.

"What is there to say?"

"Here is a distinct charge against you. A most serious charge. The most serious charge that could be made against you."

"I have nothing to say. Stay! Yes. The Bank Clerk, he says, can identify two persons who presented cheques. He need not be called upon to do so. They were myself and my brother Hyacinth. I have nothing more to say. I will answer no questions. You must do as you please."

"I have done all I could for you. I offered you your chance for confession and for excuses——"

"Confession! He says, confession!"

"And you meet me with the daring avowal that you and your brother presented those two forged cheques. Is it possible? You!"

"The two cheques. I did not say the two forged cheques. It is quite true. I drew twelve pounds with one cheque, and Daffodil drew twelve pounds with another."

The girl repeated this avowal, looking Mr. Murridge straight in the face, without the least shrinking or shame.

"Forged or not, it is the same thing. Since you have owned so much, confess the rest. Why did you take those cheques?"

"Why did I take those cheques? Oh, I have been with this man for five years, and now—he asks me why I stole his cheques!"

"Tell me, Norah. Yes, you have been with me five years. You have been so honest and faithful that I cannot understand it. Tell me why. I cannot understand it."

"I will answer no questions. Take up the Case for yourself, Mr. Murridge. You will find me at my mother's, or with Calista, when you want me. You must take it up. You cannot let it stay where it is. You shall not. When you have come to the truth, you will understand why I refused to speak."

"Tell me the truth now, then, Norah."

Mr. Murridge, who trusted no one, and thought love and friendship fond and foolish things, was strangely moved by this business. He had thought that when he could lay his hands upon the person who had robbed him, he would straightway hale that person before the magistrate without pity, and, indeed, with revengeful joy. But that person stood before him, convicted by his son's evidence and out of her own mouth, and he was moved to pity.

"Tell me the truth, Norah," he repeated. "For GOD's sake, tell me the truth, and nothing more shall be said about it! No one shall know; it shall be between us two. We will all go on as before. Only, my girl, tell me the truth."

"I cannot—I cannot. You must find it yourself. I presented one of those cheques, and my brother presented another. That is all I can tell you."

She was no longer pale. She did not tremble any more. In her cheek there was a burning spot, which might have been the outward and visible sign of conscious guilt. As such Mr. Murridge read it. On the other hand, it might betoken a wrath too deep for words. But as such he did not read it. Whatever it was, her eyes were aflame as she turned her face once more to Mr. Murridge, as she stood with the door open.

"I advise you for once to follow your own maxims. You have always advised me to trust no one. Yet you have sometimes trusted me. In this case trust no one but yourself. When you are satisfied, you will ask me to come back to you. Till then you will see me here no longer."

The office-boy listened.

"Oh, miss," he said as she closed the door, "are you going? He's gone too. He's done something. Oh, I know very well! Are you really going?"

"Really going, for a time, Joe; perhaps altogether."

"Is there a row, miss? Is he"—he jerked in the direction of Mr. Richard's chair—"is he in it?"

"You had better ask him. Joe, good-bye."

"She's been crying. The tears were on her cheeks. I wonder," said the boy, "whether I ought to go in now? Oh, if I could go in with a cutlass and a brace of pistols!"

But he was afraid.

"It is impossible," said Mr. Murrige. "She must have done it. Why did she turn so pale? Why did she tremble? Why were her cheeks so red? She must have done it! Why did she refuse to take up the Case? She must! Very well, then. There is something behind it—something that Dick can't find out. Very well, then; they've got me to deal with now. I will find out the truth for myself."

CHAPTER IX. THE BROKEN RING.

"CALISTA," said Norah, half an hour later, walking into the Infants' Ward, "I have come to stay with you a little."

"To stay with me? My dear Norah! What has happened?"

"Nothing. I have left Mr. Murrige, that is all. I am come to stay with you."

"Tell me, Norah. What is it?"

"Nothing."

In proof of this assertion she burst into tears and fell upon her sister's neck.

"Tell me, Norah."

"I cannot—yet. Write to mother and tell her that I am here—say, if you please, for a holiday. Yes, tell her I am here for a holiday."

"Go into my room, dear. I will be with you directly, and then you shall tell me as much as you please."

The Sister's room is at the end of the Ward, so that even when she is asleep she is never really away from her charge. It is at once her bedroom and sitting-room, furnished with a table and easy-chair, as well as a bed. In Calista's case—but this, I believe, is matter of individual taste—there were books—in case she might find time to read a little—and pictures, and work. Here Norah sat down and took off hat and jacket, wondering how long people live who are accused of dreadful and shameful things.

"Don't ask me why I am here," she said,

when Calista, after seeing that every Baby was comfortable, and having examined the thermometer and looked to the ventilation, came to her; "don't ask me, Calista, because I cannot tell you. I can tell no one."

"You have left Mr. Murrige, dear?"

"Yes. I have left him. I can never, never go back to him again. And, oh, Calista! I must see Hugh as soon as possible—directly."

"He is somewhere in the Hospital. I will send for him. He can see you in the corridor or somewhere. You are going to tell him what has happened?"

"I am going to tell him, Calista," said Norah frigidly, "that it is all over between us. I am going to give him back his ring."

"Oh, Norah!"

"Please don't ask me why. I cannot tell you. It is not my fault, Calista," she said, while the tears came again; "it is not my fault!"

Calista remembered Dick's strange words on Sunday: "Whatever happens it will be her fault."

"Tell me," she said, "what has Dick done?"

"I cannot tell you."

Then it was something done by Dick. How had he contrived to make mischief between Mr. Murrige and Norah? Calista resolved upon taking the earliest opportunity of seeing Master Dick. Unfortunately the events of the next day made that interview impossible for some time to come.

The Corridor in the Children's Hospital, Shadwell, is a quiet place for a Lovers' Tryst, though not like a bosky grove, entirely secluded from observation. And there are no flowers or hedges in it, and the spicy breezes blow not over cottage-gardens, but over the London Docks, which is, perhaps, the reason why they are sometimes very highly spiced. One is, however, safe from being overheard. Therefore, when Norah went out to meet her lover there, she began, quite comfortably, to cry.

"Oh, Hugh!" she said, "I wonder if you will be sorry?"

"What for, dear?"

"I wonder whether you will console yourself very soon? There are lots of prettier and better girls in the world. Oh, you will soon be happy again without me!"

"My dearest child, what do you mean?"

"I mean, Hugh, that it is all over."

Take back your ring. Our engagement is broken off."

Hugh put his hands behind him.

"You must take it, Hugh. I am serious."

"I shall not take it, Norah. I am serious too. It takes two to make an engagement, and two to break it off. I refuse, my darling."

"Hugh, it must be!"

"Tell me why it must be."

"Because—because—— I cannot tell you! Oh, Hugh, believe me! I can never marry you now, and I can never marry anyone!"

"Why—why—why?"

"Hugh," she turned upon him a pair of the most sorrowful eyes ever seen, "would you like to marry a girl disgraced for ever?"

"Disgraced, Norah!"

"Disgraced! Go away, Hugh; I can tell you no more!"

"This is truly wonderful," said her lover. "Who dares to speak of disgrace and my Norah in the same breath? My dear, when we two plighted our troth and kissed each other first, it was like the Church service, you know—for better for worse. Perhaps a little of the worse has come at the very beginning. Let me share it with you."

He took her tearful face in his hands—one on each side—and kissed her forehead and her lips.

"There is trouble in those dear eyes," he said, "but no disgrace. Norah, I flatly refuse to break it off. What will you do then?"

"Nothing," she replied. "I can do nothing. But I am in serious—terribly serious earnest, Hugh."

"Then tell me—tell me all."

She hesitated. The girl who hesitates is not always lost.

"I have been charged with a terrible accusation, Hugh—a dreadful accusation, and I have nothing to meet it with but my own denial."

"That is enough for those who love you, Norah."

"It is a charge for which people are every day sent to prison." She shuddered and trembled. "Do you understand that, Hugh? You are engaged to a girl who may even be sent to prison, because I cannot prove that I am innocent. What can innocent people do when other people tell lies about them? I am disgraced, Hugh."

"No, dear; you cannot be disgraced by

a mere accusation. Tell me all—exactly as it happened."

"No. I cannot tell you—I will not. Let him find out the truth for himself. If it is hard for me to bear the falsehood, it will be harder for him to bear the truth."

"Tell me the truth, then, Norah."

"No, I will tell no one—not even you."

"Norah dear, it is my right to ask it."

"Then I withdraw the right. We are not engaged any longer, Hugh."

"Tell me this, then. Is it something connected with Mr. Murrige?"

Norah made no reply.

"Is it anything to do with Dick?"

Still she was silent.

"Dick came here on Sunday, grumpy and miserable. Norah, let me bear your burdens for you."

"You cannot bear my burdens. I take away the right. Hugh, as long as this thing is hanging over me, until my accuser shall withdraw his charge, I am not engaged to you. Oh, Hugh, I am in dreadful earnest!" She drew his ring from her finger and kissed it—a pretty, fragile little thread of gold, set with pearls and emeralds. "Take it, Hugh." He refused with a gesture. "You must—oh, Hugh, you must! Can I wear your ring when I might have handcuffs on my wrists? Take it." Again he refused. She twisted it with her fingers and the gold snapped. "Your ring is broken, Hugh. No—let me go—let me go!"

He tried to hold her; he implored her to let him speak, but she broke from him and fled swiftly down the Corridor to her sister's Ward.

Presently Calista came out, and found the Resident Medical standing beside the open window, confused and bewildered.

"Do not contradict her," she said. "Let her have her own way. She tells me that she has broken off her engagement, and she is crying and sobbing in my room. Hugh, it is something that Dick has done. I am certain of it. He was here on Sunday, gloomy and careworn. He told me—he warned me, he said, that whatever happened was Norah's fault, because, you know, she refused him."

"Did he use those words? He is a cur, Calista! He was a cur at school, and he is a cur still. But what could he do or say? She has been accused—hush, Calista! the very whisper makes one's cheeks hot—she has been accused of something—something, she says, for which people are sent to prison. Think of that—our poor Norah!—our poor child!"

Calista laughed scornfully. "Oh!" she cried. "This is foolish; this is absurd! Who can have accused her?"

"I do not know. But I will find out before long."

"She has left Mr. Murrige, she tells me."

"Then it must be Mr. Murrige—or—Dick."

"Hugh! Can it be that Dick has himself——"

She did not finish her question, because Hugh answered it by a responsive light in his eyes.

"I will go presently," he said. "This morning there is too much to do, but in the afternoon or to-morrow I will go and see Mr. Murrige myself. Somehow or other, Calista, we will get to the bottom of this."

"Dick could not," said Calista. "Oh, it is impossible! Consider. We have always known Dick. He is almost a brother. He has been our friend and companion all the days of his life. He thought he was in love with Norah. Can a man make love to a girl, and ask her to be his wife one day, and the next day accuse her of abominable and shameful things? It is impossible, Hugh. Don't let us suspect Dick."

"Why, then, did he give you that warning, Calista? Yet we will not suspect him until I have seen Mr. Murrige, and learned all that can be learned. Meantime, what are we to do with Norah?"

"Leave her to me, Hugh."

"But she is crying and unhappy. She should be with me."

"Leave her with me, Hugh, for to-day. When you have seen Mr. Murrige we can consider what is to be done. Perhaps you will be able to lay this spectre. Then you can see her and console her as much as you please."

Norah sat on Calista's bed, crying. Presently she left off crying and began to wonder how a man could be so revengeful and so wicked. Because now she understood quite clearly that the thing must have been done by no other than Dick, who, in order to screen himself and divert suspicion, had deliberately, and in cold blood, accused her. And this was her old playfellow, the man who had told her he loved her!

She sat there until the evening. Then she got up, bathed her tearful face, brushed her hair, and went out into the Ward.

"I am come to work, Calista. My dear,

I must work. It will do me good to sit up all night. If I lie down I shall hear voices and see figures. Let me stay here among the Babies and help to nurse."

The day-nurses went away and the night-nurses came to take their places, and among them Norah stood all the brief summer night till the early morning, when the sun rose over the silent City of Labour, and then she sat down in a chair and fell fast asleep. At five o'clock Calista came out in her dressing-gown, and the nurses carried Norah to the Sister's room and laid her on the bed, just as she was, in her clothes, and sleeping heavily.

CHAPTER X. THE ADVERTISEMENT.

IN the whole of Dick Murrige's future life, whether that be long or short, one day will stand out in his memory as the most unlucky. Every man who has been weak and wicked thinks that the day when he was found out is the most unlucky day in his life. Of course, he should consider that the day when he first left the path of virtue was really that day; but to arrive at that conclusion implies a return to that thorny path with what used to be called heart and soul, which is, I believe, rare. The wicked man not infrequently turns away from his wickedness, so many forces acting upon him in the direction of righteousness; but it is seldom indeed that he regards the dodges, tricks, cheats, and deceptions of the past with aught but complacency. There was nothing, at first, to rouse special apprehensions. His father was gloomy at breakfast; he had lost his clerk as well as his sixty pounds, and the clerk was by far the more serious loss; also he could not understand, in spite of his own maxims, how the girl could possibly have done it, and what she meant by avowing the worst piece of evidence against her, and then bidding him take up the Case himself. But to his son he said nothing to alarm him. Dick accepted his father's silence as a proof that nothing more was going to be done. Norah would be forgiven, he fondly thought. As if Mr. Murrige was the kind of man to sit down satisfied with so strange a thing as this unexplained! Dick, like many crafty persons, was a great Fool. In fact, the whole history of Crime shows a remarkable development of the imaginative faculty going parallel with great craftiness, which prevents its possessors from seeing things in their right proportions, so that

they frequently get caught in their own nets. And as if Norah was the kind of girl to accept forgiveness!

He spent the morning—for the third time—with the Count, who was showing him most surprising things with the cards—things which, he clearly perceived, might, in the hands of one who could do them dexterously, lead to surprising results.

"There was a time," said the Count, "when I could do these things, before I lost my finger. Do you think I lived in a place like this, the companion of such men as come here every night? Now I can show you how we do them. Anybody may learn how they are done. But there are few indeed who can do them so as never to be suspected or caught. I have watched you, friend Richard, and I know that you can learn. I will make you, if you please, and little by little, a master of the great Art."

The great Art, of course, was the practical application of scientific Legerdmain to card-playing and gambling. In its simpler forms it means turning the king, forcing a suit, making the bridge, palming a card, giving your adversary the worst hands and yourself the best. When a young man has learned these things, and can do them with a turn of the wrist and without a movement of the eye, he has indeed advanced far, and may be trusted to earn a very decent and comfortable maintenance. But there are higher flights, and although there are many Greeks about the gaming-tables, there never was one who brought to the profession a keener intellect, a more copious resource, a greater wealth of trickery in its highest and most occult branches than the Signor Giuseppe Piranesi.

"And when I have learned all this, what am I to do?"

"Long before that time comes, you will be glad of the protection which I can give you. Ask me when the Trouble comes."

"What do you mean by the Trouble? You are always talking about the Trouble," Dick threw the cards upon the table. "I tell you there is no Trouble coming."

"And I tell you, young gentleman, there is a very great Trouble coming upon you, and that very soon. I have seen it coming day after day, and at last it has come. I believe, Richard, that it has come upon you this very day; I believe you will not go home to your father's this evening."

Dick tried not to tremble, but he suc-

ceeded ill. He tried to laugh, and there came a dismal cackle. He picked up the cards, but his hand shook. Was the man a Prophet?

"I have had a dream, my son," said the Count softly. "I dreamed that age and youth, experience and inexperience, might help each other."

"What has that got to do with me and—and the Trouble?"

"Wait—wait, and listen. My dream was of an old man and a young man. They travelled together, and were Partners, though no one knew it. They worked together. The old man knew where to go, and the young man how to work. He had been taught by the old man. They went wherever the money is—there are only a dozen places in the world worth going to—where, that is, there are rich young fellows who are fools enough to think they can win at the game-table. Do you begin to understand this dream?"

"But what has it got to do with the Trouble?"

"The Trouble may be the means of making this Dream a reality. It is a beautiful dream. There is in it the life of luxury, and of ease, and of love." Dick heard of the love and luxury without much emotion. The former moved him but little, the latter not at all. "And a life of getting money in it—money, my young friend."

Dick's cold eyes lit up.

"It will only be necessary for you to follow my instructions, and to be my pupil. You must obey me, and you shall be my Partner. I will introduce you, and I will play square, like the fools at the table, because the cursed loss of my finger prevents me from playing any other way. But you—you—you shall play with every advantage of Science, skill, and courage."

"Oh!" Dick, it is fair to say, had no objections on the score of honesty, but he distrusted his own powers. "Oh, it is impossible!"

"A beautiful dream. Everywhere the most delightful life, and the easiest; everywhere the fools who sit about the tables, and expect to win. Perhaps a time may come when it will be no dream, but a necessity." The Count sighed, and Dick's eyes kindled. "A divine life, with everything that can be bought, and always money at your fingers' ends. You might be my pupil. In six months I would teach you enough. Then we would begin. You should be the young Englishman of fortune

on his travels. No one suspects the young Englishman of fortune; he is always a Fool; he is always the prey of the Profession. Would you like to be that young Englishman? He loses when the stakes are low, and he wins when the stakes are high. Would that suit you?"

The spider has many blandishments. To the fly he talks the language of innocence, of flattery, of disinterested friendship, and of love. But to brother-spider he uses a different kind of talk.

"If I could only get away!" he said. "As for the City, I hate it! If I could only get away!"

"You may—you shall. My dear young friend, I will help you because you can help me. That is the foundation of every friendship. My secrets are yours and yours are mine for the future. We must trust each other, because we can be of service to each other. Hands upon it."

Dick gave him his hand.

"So," said the Count. "Now, my friend, I have business. I will leave you here. I shall return in two hours. You will stay here;" for the first time he assumed a tone of command. "You will not leave this house until my return." He put on his hat and lit a cigarette. "By the way, have you got me another cheque?"

"No," said Dick shortly.

"Those first three cheques—they were all right—on the square?"

"Of course they were all right. Why should they not be all right?"

"Good—very good. Your secrets are mine, and mine are yours. Partners such as we shall be have no secrets from each other, have they?"

He laughed pleasantly, and went away.

Dick, left alone, began to imagine that life. His own had been so dull that he had not the least idea what it would be like. But there would be no City work, no office, no drudgery of copying and of making up books. There would be change and excitement in it; there would be money in it, and gambling (on the safe side) in it. Was the Count serious? Yet he had spent a great deal of trouble over him. He was not likely to spend that time and trouble for nothing. The chance of leading such a life depended upon himself.

He seized the pack of cards, and began to practise some of the passes and tricks which the Count had taught him. But he was excited and nervous. The most that he dared to hope that morning was safety

for a time; what was opened up for him now was more than safety for a time: it was rescue.

The Count said that the Trouble was coming that very day. Well: he knew that the cheques were burned, with the cheque-book. There can be no forgery unless the documents are produced, and they were gone. Oh, what a fortunate chance was this that placed in his hands the very proofs of his own guilt! The cheques were burned. If his father discovered the truth, he would do nothing—nothing at all. There would be a Row; there would certainly be a Row. Well, the greatest Row breaks no bones. And he would, perhaps, be turned into the street. Very well. Then, perhaps, the Count would really do what he had promised—become his friend and Partner. Because, you see, Dick had as yet none of that sense of honour which exists between brothers in iniquity. That had to be created in him.

He could do nothing with the cards. He threw them down, and took up the paper. It was the *Times*, and on the second column his eyes fell upon the following advertisement:

"FIFTEEN POUNDS REWARD.—Whereas on the 3rd, the 5th, and the 11th days of June respectively, there were presented and cashed at the Royal City and Provincial Bank, Finsbury Circus Branch, three cheques, each for twelve pounds, payable to self or bearer, and purporting to be signed by myself. The above-named reward will be paid to any person who shall discover the man who presented them. He is described as an elderly man, well dressed, speaks with a foreign accent, has short white hair and white moustache, without beard, and has lost the forefinger of his right hand.

"(Signed) JOHN MURRIDGE,
"Finsbury Circus, E.C."

Mr. Murrige, in short, was a practical man. The Case perplexed and worried him. He could see no way out of it. Norah took the cheques; that was certain. She and her brother presented two of them; that was certain. Why? And who presented the other three?

There cannot be many men in London with the three distinctive characteristics of age, a foreign accent, and the loss of the forefinger on the right hand. The man he wanted must be an accomplice in this robbery, or he must have received payment

with these cheques. In the former case, he might be discovered by someone who would see the advertisement; in the latter, he might himself come forward. He was quite right; the advertisement produced the man. It did more. There were, I think, fifty-two members of the Club. It was, therefore, remarkable that, in the course of that day and the next, Mr. Murrage received forty-six letters, all from the immediate neighbourhood of St. Pancras, King's Cross, and Camden Town, and all informing him that the writer had it in his power to produce the man advertised for on the receipt of the promised reward, which might be sent by return post. Thirty-six of the writers followed up the letter by a personal call; twenty-six were abusive when they found that they had to go away with nothing—not even their tempers, which they lost in the office—and ten went away sorrowful. There would have been fifty-one letters; but, unfortunately, the remaining five did not see the *Times*.

A simple advertisement. Nothing more. Yet it knocked down at one stroke the whole of Dick's careful construction. No more was left of it after the advertisement appeared than remains of an Ice Palace in the summer.

Dick knew that. The moment he read the advertisement he understood what would happen.

At two o'clock the Count returned.

"My friend," he said gravely, "you have done wrong."

"What have I done?"

"You have not trusted me. A dozen times have I asked you if those cheques were right."

"Well, they are——" he began.

"Have done with lies," said the Count roughly. "Understand, once and for all, that there are to be no more lies between us. You are to tell me the truth—always. Do you hear? Else you go your own way. Even this morning I gave you another chance."

"You ought to have shown me the paper."

"You might have seen the paper."

"Have you been to my father's?"

"I have. In any case I should have gone to him. What! Am I to be advertised for? Am I to go into hiding? Besides," his face broke into a sweet smile, "there are our worthy friends, the members. Do you think that, for fifteen pounds, these gentlemen would not

rush to denounce the man without the forefinger? Therefore I anticipated them. Why not?"

Dick waited to know what happened.

"I took a cab. I drove to Finsbury Circus. I sent my card to your father. He was not alone, but he admitted me immediately."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing—your father said nothing; from which I augur the worst. For myself, as he might wish to hear from me further, I have given him my name and my address—not at this house."

"He knows that I gave you those cheques. Did he say nothing?"

"He said nothing. When you go home this evening, he will, without doubt, have a great deal to say. But to me he said nothing at all. There is more, however. I was not alone."

"Who was there?"

"Your father knows now that you gave two more cheques to be cashed. There was another cheque half filled up. A boy in the office has found it and given it to your father."

"I knew the little devil had got it. I wish I had him here—just for five minutes. I wish I had him here!"

"He had also picked up and gummed together the fragments of paper written all over by you in imitation of your father's handwriting. A dangerous boy!"

"I wish I had him here."

"What will you do now?"

"I won't go home again," said Dick.

"Well?"

"Oh," cried Dick, "let that dream of yours come to something, Count. Teach me all you can, and I will obey you, and be your servant, or your Partner, or anything you please. I was a fool not to tell you all a week ago and more."

"It was foolish, indeed, because I guessed the truth all along. There are many young men who do these things. They are always found out; then there is Trouble. As for them, they are mostly silly boys who are born only to sink and be forgotten. But you are different; you are clever, though too crafty, and cold, yet too easily frightened; you have courage—of a kind—such a kind as I want; therefore I will help you."

Dick murmured something about gratitude.

"No," said the Count; "do not talk of gratitude. First of all, you will stay here for a while until I am ready. While you

are here you must not leave this room. You are a prisoner. I will give out to the landlord that you are an invalid. You will spend your time in practising the things I will teach you. Courage! You have burned your boats; you have broken with the past."

CHAPTER XL STILL ONE CHANCE LEFT.

THE blackest cloud sat on the brow of Mr. Murrige. Business was before him which wanted his clever clerk, and she was gone. Wonderful! unheard-of! She confessed what she had done, and she went away without a word of excuse, without any appeal to mercy; just as if somebody else had done the thing. Never was audacity more complete.

"I could forgive her," said Mr. Murrige. "I feel it in me to forgive her." Perhaps the thought of her cleverness, and the loss of her departure, assisted him to this Christian frame of mind. "Yes; I feel that I could forgive her. I could stop the sixty pounds out of her salary, and we could go on just exactly the same as before; only I should lock up the cheque-book; if she'd only tell me why she did it, and say she was sorry. And the little devil goes off with a toss of her head and a glare in her eyes as if somebody else had taken the cheques! It's wonderful! it's wonderful!"

Meantime, how could he replace her?

"I'll make her come back to me," he said. "If she won't accept my terms I'll prosecute her, even without the cheques. She must have taken them out of Dick's drawer, too. Women will do anything—anything! But that was clever. What will her father say? I don't care. I'll prosecute the Honourable Norah Cronan, daughter of Viscount Clonsilla, for forgery! That is"—he paused—"if I can without the cheques; and then she'll be glad enough to accept my terms."

While Mr. Murrige was thus breathing fury and flames, he received a call. A young gentleman, whose appearance was unknown to him, knocked at the door and walked in.

"My name is Aquila," he said. "You will understand why I have called when I tell you that I am engaged to Miss Norah Cronan."

"Oh!" Mr. Murrige replied, with a snort; "you are, are you? And has that young lady seen you since yesterday morning?"

"Yes; I have seen her."

"Has she made any kind of statement to you? Do you understand what has happened?"

"I learn from her that some kind of charge has been brought against her."

"She is accused—not by me, but by another—of theft and forgery. Sixty pounds is the total. I have been robbed in my own office of sixty pounds by five distinct forgeries. She made no bones of confessing the thing to me. Laughed at it, so to speak. Laughed at it! Told me to find out the truth for myself."

"Confessing! Norah confessing?"

"Certainly. And if, young gentleman, you can explain how she came to confess without the least shame, I should be glad to hear that explanation. Come."

"Let me understand. How could she confess? What did she say?"

"She confessed that she cashed one of the cheques herself, and that her brother cashed another. Is not that confession enough for you?"

"Nothing would be enough for me, because I am as firmly convinced of her innocence as of my own. Much more firmly, in fact, because Norah could not do this thing. Consider, Mr. Murrige"—the young man's voice trembled—"this is a very dreadful charge to bring against anyone, and most of all against a girl. Yet you talk of it as if it was not only a possible charge, but already proved."

"Every day in this City," said Mr. Murrige, "there are robberies of this kind. They are all committed by perfectly innocent persons previously unsuspected. When they are found out, the first cry is that it is impossible. Now, young gentleman, I am very sorry, for the girl's sake—I don't know another person in the world for whom I would say so much. The thing is impossible, is it not? Yet it has happened—"

"Is that all? Tell me exactly. Is it all that Norah said?"

"She said that she would answer no more questions."

"Is that all?"

"Not quite. What she said then—I can't understand it—was that I must find out the truth for myself. What do you make of that?"

"Only that you have not got the truth yet. Stay; let us send for her brother. Will you let me put a question to him in your presence?"

"By all means. Send the office-boy in a cab."

Hugh hastily wrote a note, and dispatched the boy in a hansom. From the City to Gower Street a tolerably swift cab takes twenty minutes. They had, therefore, forty minutes at least to wait.

"And now," said Mr. Murrige, "your relations with this young lady are so intimate, and you know so much, it would be just as well if you knew all."

He opened his safe, and took from it a roll of paper.

"This document," he said, "was placed in my hands by no other than my own son. Read it, remembering that the girl is his old companion and friend from childhood."

Hugh read it through, slowly and deliberately. Then he read it a second time.

"You accept this statement," he asked, "without question?"

"Surely. It is a perfectly plain statement by my own son, who can have nothing whatever to gain by misrepresenting the facts. You observe that he suppressed as long as he could the most important fact."

Hugh made no reply. But he read the paper a third time. Then he looked carefully about the room.

"Come, Mr. Murrige," he said, "let us examine this document with a little more care. Dick says that Norah shut the door; that the door, as sometimes happens, was not quite close, but stood ajar; that from the place where he sat he could see through this partly open door. Come into the other office with me."

He carefully adjusted the door so that it should be ajar at an angle of about eleven and a half degrees, which is, so to speak, a good large jar.

"Now," he said, "if it was ajar it certainly could not have been wider than this. Here are two tables and two chairs; I suppose he must have been sitting at one of them while he saw the door ajar."

"This is my son's chair."

"Sit here, then," Hugh went on. "Tell me what you can see in your own office?"

Nothing whatever could be seen of the inner office from Dick's seat, and nothing from the other seat. This will readily be understood if we remember that the fireplace was on the same side for both rooms, and that Mr. Murrige sat near the fire in his room, and Dick between the fireplace and the window in his, while the office-boy was accommodated with a table and a chair on the other side of the fire.

"Very good," said Hugh. "The first point of the story is that your son saw Norah from his own place, through the

partly opened door. Now, in order to see her, he would have been obliged to leave the seat and go over to the other side of the room."

"That makes no difference," said Mr. Murrige. "The point is that he saw what was being done. He may have been standing—or prying and peeping—that matters nothing."

"I do not agree with you," said Hugh. "The point is that, not being curious, he saw without taking the trouble to spy."

"Still, no difference. Why shouldn't he spy? A man doesn't like to confess that he was prying and spying."

Hugh went on to another point.

"He says that Norah folded the cheques and placed them in her bosom. Very good. Let us see the cheques?"

"They are lost. They have been stolen."

"That is unfortunate. Did you see them?"

"Of course I did."

"In what manner. Had they been folded?"

It was a bow drawn at a venture. But Mr. Murrige changed countenance and was disconcerted.

"Strange," he said; "I had forgotten. Only one was folded. The others had been rolled or carried flat in a pocket-book. I noticed that they were not folded. But one was folded. I am certain that one of them was folded."

"This makes, you see, the second mistake in this document."

"What do these little mistakes matter in so weighty a charge as this? My son says that he saw with his own eyes—it doesn't signify to me whether he was peeping through a keyhole—he actually saw Norah tear those cheques out of the book. You cannot get over that plain fact."

"Plainly, then, Mr. Murrige, I don't believe it. If that is the only way out of the difficulty, I do not believe it."

"You think my son lied?"

"I am perfectly sure that if he charged Norah with theft, he lies."

"You are engaged to the young lady. You are bound to say that. But, young gentleman, get over her confession, if you can. I tell you I am ready to believe that my son was mistaken if you can get over the plain facts—that I have been robbed, and that Norah confesses."

"Let us wait till Daffodil comes."

He sat down opposite to Mr. Murrige, and they waited. There was nearly half

an hour yet to wait. To sit opposite to a man for half an hour, waiting for a question to be asked, a question in which is concerned the honour of the girl you love, is awkward.

While they waited, however, there came another visitor.

Mr. Murrige's door was standing wide open, and the visitor walked in.

He was an elderly gentleman with large white moustache, very neatly dressed, with an upright, soldierly bearing. He took off his hat politely, and as he did so Mr. Murrige started, because he recognised the man for whom he had that morning advertised. At least, this man was short of one finger—the forefinger of his right hand was gone.

"You are Mr. Murrige?" he asked in a slightly foreign accent.

"I am, sir. And you?"

"I believe I am the man whose description is given in the *Times* of this morning."

"Pray go on, sir."

"It is, perhaps, usual to advertise for a gentleman under the promise of a reward as if he was a criminal."

"If he is wanted for evidence, why not?"

"You may withdraw that advertisement, sir; and you may save your money. I am the man who presented three cheques at your bank, and for twelve pounds, and each signed by yourself."

"Oh!" said Mr. Murrige. "Now we shall see." He turned to Hugh. "Perhaps, as you feel so strongly in this business, you would like to leave me alone with this—this gentleman?"

"On the contrary, I feel so strongly about it, that I must ask your permission to hear what he has to say."

"As you please. It is the next step in the Enquiry. You understand that I shall connect these three cheques, as well as the other two, with Norah or her brother."

"You will try."

"The question is," said Mr. Murrige, "first, where you got those cheques; and next, for what consideration?"

"As regards the first," replied the stranger, "you ought to know to whom you gave them."

"I did not give them to anyone. Those cheques were stolen, and the signature is a forgery."

"Really? That is awkward. It is very awkward."

"But tell us," cried Hugh impatiently, springing to his feet. "Tell us, man!"

"I am much distressed to hear this,"

said the stranger. "I confess, when I saw this advertisement this morning, that I feared there was something wrong about the cheques. I am most distressed."

"You have not answered my question yet," said Mr. Murrige. "Never mind your distress."

"I am distressed on your account, sir. However, the person from whom I received the cheques was your own son, Mr. Richard Murrige."

"What!" Mr. Murrige shouted.

"Your own son—no other, certainly."

Hugh sat down.

"Why—why—for what consideration did you receive that money?"

"In part payment of a loan. I had lent my young friend, from time to time, sums of money amounting in all"—he produced a pocket-book and looked at an entry—"to forty-nine pounds nineteen shillings. He has paid me by three instalments of twelve pounds each—thirty-six pounds. There remains, therefore, the sum of thirteen pounds nineteen shillings—thirteen guineas we will say. For this I have his acknowledgment—here it is."

He handed Mr. Murrige a slip of paper—a simple I O U drawn and signed by his son. Mr. Murrige examined it. As he held it in his hand, the room became dark, and the figures before him stood as if in thick cloud, and Hugh's voice was like a voice in a dream. For he suddenly understood that it was his son, and not Norah at all, who had done this thing, and he saw, in the signature of his son what he had never noticed before—perhaps he had never before seen his son's signature—a fatal resemblance to his own.

"You have not yet, sir," said Hugh, "given us your name and address."

The stranger laid his card upon the table. Hugh took it, read it, and handed it to Mr. Murrige.

"Signor Giuseppe Piranesi, No. 88, Argyle Square. That address will always find you?"

"I am in lodgings there. That address will find me for a few weeks longer."

"Why did you lend my son money?" Mr. Murrige asked quietly.

"To pay his losses at cards."

"His losses at—at cards? Dick's losses at cards?"

"Your son's losses at cards."

"You will have to prove these things, sir," said Mr. Murrige. "You will have to prove them. You shall go before a magistrate."

"Before the Lord Mayor himself if you please. Meantime, I will keep this little document." He replaced the IOU in his pocket-book. "And, if I might suggest as the next step, you might put one or two questions to your son. As, first, how and where he spends his evenings; next, how he has done lately in the matter of luck; and, thirdly, who has lent him money to go on with?"

Mr. Murrige said nothing.

"As to the first, he will reply that he spends all his evenings at a certain club, where there is social conversation, with a little friendly gambling—such as a baccarat-table and tables for écarté, and so forth, and that he is a gambler acharné—for his age, I have never seen a more determined gambler. As for the second question, he will tell you that luck has been very much against him for some weeks; and, as to the third, that the Proprietor of the Club lent him money from time to time. When you have put these questions and received these answers, I think that you will not want to go before any magistrates."

"You are, then," said Hugh, "the Proprietor of a Gambling Club?"

"I am its Founder, young gentleman. I shall be happy to welcome you, in case you, too, like Mr. Richard Murrige, are devoted to the green table. You will find the Club a highly respectable body of gentlemen."

Mr. Murrige sat quite silent.

Just then Daffodil arrived. He knew nothing of any trouble, and walked in with his careless, cheerful bearing.

"Here I am, Mr. Murrige. What do you want me for? Is my father elevated to an Earl or a Duke?"

"Will you ask him the question, or shall I?" said Hugh.

Mr. Murrige shook his head.

"Well, then," Hugh went on, "be serious, Daff, if you can. Do you remember cashing a cheque at the Royal City and Provincial Bank the other day?"

"Yes; I cashed a cheque all right. For twelve pounds, it was."

"How did you get that cheque?"

"Why, Dick gave it to me. Asked me to cash it on my way to Crosby Hall, where I was to meet him. I gave him the money. Why?"

"Never mind why. Do you know this gentleman?"

The Signor offered his hand.

"It is my young friend whom Fortune favours. When shall you come again?"

The young man blushed.

"I know him," he said. "I have seen him twice."

"Only twice?" Hugh asked. "Consider."

"Only twice," replied the Signor. "The young gentleman has only twice been to the Club."

"Are you in the habit of gambling, Daff?"

"I've only gambled twice in my life," he replied, blushing.

"Are you in debt?"

"I owe about five pounds to my tailor. It is more than I can pay, but it is all I owe."

"You have only played cards for money twice?"

"I have played whist in some of the fellows' rooms for threepenny points. But I have only gambled twice. The first time I won five shillings, and the second fifty shillings and more."

"Well, who took you?"

Daff hesitated and turned red again. No one likes to tell tales.

"You must tell us. It is for Norah's sake."

"Well, then, Dick took me."

"Dick is my most regular member," said the Signor, as if it was a credit to him. "He begins with the first, and he plays as long as he can stay. My most regular member. There is no one more regular than Dick. He should have been a Russian."

"Very good. There is only one other question I want to ask you. Did Dick, to your knowledge, ever ask anyone else to cash a cheque for him?"

"Once he asked Norah."

"How do you know?"

"Norah told me. We were talking, and she told me. I said she had no business to run errands for Dick."

"Now, sir," said Hugh, "I hope you understand the reason which prompted Norah to refuse any other answer, or to conduct this Enquiry? She knew beforehand."

"There is villainy somewhere," said Mr. Murrige harshly; "villainy somewhere! How do I know that this is not a conspiracy? As for you, sir," he turned to the Signor, "I believe you can be sent to prison for corrupting the young."

Signor Piranesi laughed courteously.

"I assure you, sir," he said, "the members of my Club are quite corrupt, as regards gambling, before they come to me."

"And as for you," Mr. Murrige shook his finger at Daffodil, "as for you, I believe you are in the job somehow. Villains all! villains all!"

"And I too?" said Hugh.

"You have got the girl to defend."

"The villainy, Mr. Murrige, is established nearer home. You are ready, I hope, to acquit the person first charged?"

"Certainly not—certainly not. How do I know that this is not a conspiracy against my son? Where is he? Let him be confronted with these two. Let me have more evidence. Let me find the last of the stolen cheques."

Now, all this time the door had been standing wide-open, and behind it sat the office-boy eagerly drinking in every word. He now, for the first time, understood exactly what had happened. And he now began to experience the joys of revenge, because he had it in his power to deal his long-meditated blow on the man who had called him a measly little devil.

Accordingly, he stepped from his place and boldly entered the inner office.

"What do you want?" asked his master.

"Please, sir, I've heard it all."

"What if you have? All the world shall hear it all before long."

"Please, sir," the boy's bearing was considerably more humble than that invariably adopted by his favourite heroes, but the matter is more important than the manner; "please, sir, I've found something which Mr. Richard dropped."

"What is it?"

The boy produced an envelope in which were two pieces of paper. One of them, pink in colour, he laid on the table.

"It is the last of the cheques!" cried Mr. Murrige.

The signature was only, as yet, in pencil, very carefully written. The rest of the cheque was filled up. Like all the rest, it was drawn for the sum of twelve pounds.

"What is the other paper in your hand?" asked Hugh.

"Mr. Richard was always writing things and tearing them up. One day he spent all the morning in writing over a single sheet of paper. Then he tore it up into little pieces. I picked them up and pieced them together."

He gave Hugh the result. It was a half sheet of foolscap. It had been torn into a hundred pieces, and was now put together like a child's puzzle, and gummed upon another paper. Across it was written, over and over again, like one of Coutts's cheques,

the name of John Murrige—John Murrige—John Murrige, all exactly alike, and all in exact imitation of Mr. Murrige's usual signature. Hugh placed this before Mr. Murrige.

"Are you satisfied now, sir?" he asked.

"I want my son's explanation. You can all go. I am not satisfied until I have my son's explanation."

They left him. But in the outer office the boys sat with a broad grin upon his expressive countenance. He was one of Nature's artless children, and the thought of Dick's downfall filled him with a joy which he had not learned to suppress and was not ashamed to show. Presently Mr. Richard would come in unsuspecting. Then his father would call him, and the Row would begin. And then the policeman would be called in and they would all go off together to the Mansion House, where he, the office-boy, would give evidence.

"And then—" he smiled sweetly—"then I shall see him wriggle."

The office-boy sat all day long lulled with this pleasant anticipation, and contented though he had no novelette in the drawer. Mr. Richard would come upstairs, unsuspecting that his father would call him.

Unfortunately, Mr. Richard did not come that day at all. The office-boy was disappointed. The Row would take place in the privacy of Camden Town. Again, unfortunately, though Mr. Murrige went home thinking he would get that explanation from his son, he was unable even to ask for it, for his son was out when he arrived, and didn't come home at all. And the office-boy will now, probably, never see Mr. Richard wriggle.

CHAPTER XII. UNCLE JOSEPH AS AN INSTRUMENT.

"No, sir!" Mr. Murrige repeated obstinately; "I am not satisfied."

It was the next morning. Hugh called again to learn the result of the proposed explanation.

"I am not satisfied," he repeated. "Where is my son? I don't know. He has not been home all night."

"Has he run away, then? It looks like it."

"I do not know. I say, that until he has an opportunity of meeting these charges, I will not condemn him. What do I know? The case against him may be a conspiracy got up by you, the girl, and her brother,

and the scoundrel who owns a gambling den. Am I to believe that a boy who has all his life been quiet and orderly is suddenly to become a thief and a gambler?"

"We do not ask you to believe that. We ask you to believe that his vices were kept a secret from you—that he lost money, borrowed in the hope of winning it back, lost that, and borrowed more, until he became deep in debt—deep, that is, for a man of his position—and that under the temptation and pressure, he gave way. That is what we ask you to believe!"

"I shall believe nothing. I will form no theory, and I will not condemn my son until I have seen him, and heard what he has to say. For aught I know you may be keeping him hidden out of my way."

"Then you will not withdraw this charge against Norah?"

"Certainly not. It was my son's accusation, not mine. It is not for me to withdraw it until I am convinced that it is false."

"You have evidence in your hand sufficient to convince any reasonable person."

"Perhaps you think so. The evidence of two persons already accused, and by their own admission implicated—the evidence of a foreigner and a professed gambler, and the evidence of a miserable office-boy."

"With his documents."

"What do the documents amount to? Nothing. The imitation of my signature may have been Norah's for aught I know."

Hugh left him. He was not to be shaken.

I suppose Mr. Murridge knew perfectly well that there was no escape. The fact was proved, but he was obstinate. Until his son could be confronted with this evidence he would not condemn him. Until that time, therefore, the charge against Norah would not be retracted. Nor would she listen to the voice of Love; nor would she return to Mr. Murridge; nor would his business get itself accomplished; nor would his clients establish their Royal, Noble, and Gentle Descent. So that the impediment of Dick's flight produced consequences of a very wide and unexpected kind. You stick a little pin into a piece of machinery; there is the least possible jar which spreads through all the wheels and pistons, and is felt even to the foundations on which the machinery is built. For a whole fortnight they lived in this suspense, Norah remaining with her sister at the Hospital.

It was reserved for Uncle Joseph to be

the humble instrument by which this impediment was to be removed. And it happened in this way.

It was his custom, in these long summer evenings, to revisit, by the help of the omnibus, some of the scenes of his former greatness, and especially a certain well-known tavern in Great Queen Street. Here he knew the manager and some of the head-waiters—in fact, he knew by sight every waiter in London, and had a nodding acquaintance with hundreds of the gentry who every morning, about ten o'clock, assemble on the kerbstone outside the great restaurants, waiting to be taken on for the evening. Under their arms most of them carry the uniform of their profession. They are an inoffensive folk, as may be gathered by anyone who will loiter for a minute and listen to their talk; they give no trouble; they never want anybody's property; if you were to offer them three-acre allotments they would not listen; they have never been known to strike, to combine, to agitate, or to demonstrate; they never march in procession, and have not, between them all, a single banner or a bit of bunting; they are, in the evening, always beautifully dressed for their work; they are civil of speech, active, and zealous; they have, one and all, a curiously cultivated taste in wine; and they are said to have but one vice. This they share with many landed gentlemen. It is a love for the Turf.

Uncle Joseph, who had formerly been an honoured guest two or three nights in every week, now sat humbly in the manager's room, reading the *ménus* of the day. Alas! they were not for him—those gorgeous-coloured cards, inscribed with the names and titles (all in French) of the most toothsome and delightful dishes. It was something to know that the Banquets still went on, though he was no longer seated at the table near the presiding officer, as richly decorated as a German official; and, no doubt, it was a consolation to accept the hospitable glass of sherry which was sometimes proffered in the manager's room.

One evening, about ten days after Dick vanished away, Uncle Joseph paid a visit to the tavern. There were several beautiful banquets going on, and he read the *ménus* with the soft regrets due to the happy past. It was nearly nine when he got up to go—the hour when the active business of the banquet is finished, and after the material, the intellectual Feast

was to begin with the speeches. Alas! they would never hear him speak again.

As he passed from the manager's room into the hall a door on the first floor was thrown open, and there came out such a joyous sound, a mingling of many sounds in a fine confusion, such as the cliques of glasses, the laughter of men who have drunk plenty of wine, the shuffling of waiters' feet, the noise of plates, and the popping of corks, that Uncle Joseph's knees trembled.

"Ah," he said, "it is a blessing indeed to feel that the Craft is not falling off."

He went away, and presently found an omnibus.

Every night about this time he was seized with a dreadful yearning for champagne. This evening it was a yearning which tortured him. The festive sound of the revelry was too much for the old man, and his heart felt like lead to think that there was no more champagne to be had during the short remainder of his history. When he got out of his omnibus at King's Cross, and began to walk homewards, this yearning held him and shook him so that he trembled as he walked, and people thought that he must be suffering from senile weakness. It was not this; it was the yearning after champagne which made his brain to reel and his eyes to swim. Uncle Joseph had never married; the experience might have taught him that the passion of Love in some of its forms, as when its object is absent, closely resembled this craving of his for the divine drink which sparkles in the cup and mounts to a man's brain, filling him with pride, and joy, and charity towards all men. Gin-and-water might stay the craving, but as yet he was a quarter of an hour from his gin-and-water, and though there were many public-houses on the way, Uncle Joseph had no money; even gin-and-water was almost as unattainable as champagne.

While he stopped, however, letting his fancy revel in imaginary goblets, beakers, cups, and glasses, all full, and brimming over, and foaming, and sparkling, and trembling, he became conscious of a face, the sight of which was so little in harmony with his thoughts, that the cup was, so to speak, dashed from his lips and the beverage of the gods was spilt upon the ground.

The face, or rather the head, was in a second-floor window of a house on the other side of the street; it was looking up and down the street; a perfectly familiar face, yet for a while Uncle Joseph could not

remember at all to whom it belonged, so great was the yearning within him for champagne. Presently, however, he regained some command over himself, and understood that the face belonged to none other than to Dick Murridge. It was twilight now, but the old, that is to say, some of the old, have long sight, and the gas below caught the face. Oh, there could be no doubt that it was the face of Dick Murridge the Runaway.

For by this time it was well known in vague terms that there was Trouble about some cheques, and that Dick had run away, and that Norah had quarrelled with Mr. Murridge, and was staying with Calista under the pretext or pretence of a holiday.

This seemed a very remarkable discovery. Uncle Joseph was, by nature, curious, inquisitive, into other people's affairs, and of a prying nature. Therefore, he at once resolved to pursue this adventure farther.

The house, he now perceived, was a public-house—something better than the ordinary run of street-taverns—for it had a side entrance, marked "Hotel." His wits were now completely restored, and he was able to observe carefully the position of the window at which Dick Murridge was sitting. As soon as he was quite certain on this point, he boldly entered by the side-door, and walked upstairs.

Ten days of hiding in his upper chamber had begun to tell upon Dick Murridge. So great was the terror instilled into him by his Instructor and Protector of his father's vengeance and wrath, that he was afraid to venture out, even after dark, having a confused notion that every policeman in London would have a warrant for his arrest in his pocket, and that he would be taken up on suspicion. He stayed, therefore, all day long in one room, leading a most doleful and miserable existence, ordered by the Count to practise continually the tricks and cozenage of the cards, which were to advance him to that life of Perfect Delight promised by the Tempter. Never had Professor a more eager or an apter pupil. Never did Chinaman take more kindly to ways of guile than Dick Murridge, insomuch that his past ardour and passion for gambling wholly died away, and the excitement of chance seemed a poor thing indeed compared with the excitement of dexterity. He called it dexterity because the Professor gave it that name, and because, in his hands, the mystery of cheating at cards became a Fine

Art of the most manifold and occult contrivance, the most profound combination and calculation, the swiftest movement of hand, and the steadiest guard on eye and face. Yet to practise the Black Art all day long, hidden away from the world in a single room, is monotonous.

Suppose that one were to receive, as a gift, the power of cheating with the certainty of never being found out. There are a thousand ways of cheating besides that of cheating at cards. Would not this power be a constant temptation even to the most virtuous among us? What would it not be to one who, like this unfortunate Dick, had been brought up from childhood to believe that there never was any morality, any honour, any honesty, except what springs from a feeling of self-preservation and protection? Would he not jump at such a chance? Now this was exactly the chance that was offered to Dick Murridge. It came in his extremity, when he had cut himself off from his own people by a deed which would never be forgotten or forgiven. It came when he was in an agony of despair and terror, and it seemed to open a way of life of the greatest ease, comfort, and profit. He knew not yet that there is no way of life without competition, and therefore jealousy, with its attendant tokens of malice, slander, mischief, calumny, and the biting of back. Also he knew not how quickly the professional gambler is detected, and how even the most unbounded lovers of the cards become shy of playing with him. All this he had still to learn.

But it was dull in that upper chamber, which he left only to go downstairs at meal-time to the Bar Parlour, where he sat at table with the landlord and his family. They knew him as a young gentleman, presumably under a temporary cloud, in whom the Signor, Proprietor of the Club, was interested. It was horribly dull. He hated reading; he grew tired of drawing; he could not be always practising with the cards; he wanted someone to talk with.

"Good-evening. Mr. Richard," said Uncle Joseph, entering noiselessly.

Dick's head and shoulders were out of the window; but it does not take long to change the position of a head and shoulders.

"What!" he cried, springing to his feet. "You here—you?"

"Yes, I am here. Ah, you are very snug and quiet, Dick, here! No one would ever expect to find you here. I was just

going along the street, you know—just walking down the street, when I saw your face at the window. What a surprise! what a surprise! How pleased your father will be!"

"Is he? What does he—what does he—what does he want with me?"

Uncle Joseph nodded his head impressively. Some men can convey a solemn and impressive assurance much better by a nod of the head than by any words. Uncle Joseph's nod made this young man understand first that his evil deeds were known to everybody, and next that his father would certainly prosecute him. Therefore he sat down again with terror undisguised.

"What did you do it for?" asked Uncle Joseph, who had not the least idea what had been done. But everybody knew that something must have been done, else why did Dick run away?

"Because I was hard up. What else should I do it for?"

In the extremity of his terror Dick presented a manly sulkiness.

"How did you do it?" asked Uncle Joseph again.

"Well, if you want money, and can get it by signing another man's name to a cheque, I suppose you'd do it that way."

"Ah! To be sure—to be sure; I never thought of it in that light." Uncle Joseph was acquiring information rapidly. "Ah, and when did you do it?"

"Six weeks ago, if you want to know."

"To be sure. Six weeks it was ago. Yes. You are perfectly right, Dick, to keep out of the way—perfectly right—perfectly right. If I were you I would continue to keep out of the way. It is a very serious thing. And your father is a hard man—very. What did you do with the money?"

"I paid some of my debts."

"Quite right. Quite right. As an honest man should. So far you acted wisely. And have you any of it left?"

"Some—not much."

"This is a very quiet and comfortable room, Dick. I don't know that I should like to live in a bedroom always, but for a change now, when one really wishes to be undisturbed. Isn't it rather dull here?"

"I suppose it is."

"Look here, Dick, I'll come here sometimes." The old man's dull face lit up suddenly as a brilliant thought occurred to him. "I'll come here sometimes of an evening, and we'll chat. It's dull for me,

too, in the evenings when I recall the glorious evenings I used to have in the time—dear me!—in the time that is past."

Dick received the proposition doubtfully.

"This will be very much better than going to your father and telling him where you are, won't it?"

"Can you keep a thing quiet?" asked Dick.

"Can I? Haven't I kept the sublime secrets of Thirty-Three Degrees? Secrets of all the Degrees? You forget, young man, that you are speaking to one whose life has been spent in doing nothing else except to keep the secret and work the Degree, and enjoy the Banquet afterwards. Give me a secret and I am happy. With the Banquet afterwards."

Dick reflected. There had been, earlier in the day, a conversation with his Professor, in which the latter promised to take him out of the country in a week at furthest, as soon, in fact, as he had concluded the sale of his Proprietary Club with all its rights, advantages, privileges, goodwill, and clientèle. The purchaser, we may explain, in parenthesis, was a gentleman connected with the Turf, and in some ways entirely fitted for the post of Proprietor. That is to say, he was perfectly unscrupulous, without morals, honesty, prejudice, or pity. And yet for want of the good manners which served the Count in lieu of these things, he speedily ruined the Club, and dispersed the gamblers, who now gamble elsewhere. A week at furthest. He could not shove the old gentleman down the stairs as he wished to do. It was necessary either to change his lodging or to conciliate him.

He conciliated him. He assured Uncle Joseph that it would give him the greatest satisfaction to confide in his honour, and to receive him in this apartment.

"Then," said the old man, with an involuntary smacking of his lips, "as you've got, no doubt, some of the money left, my dear young friend, and it is very pleasant to sit and talk, let us have—ah!—let us have—oh!" he drew a long, deep sigh, "a bottle of champagne."

I suppose his long professional career had accustomed him to associate champagne with secrecy, just as other people's experience leads them to associate champagne with Love, or with racecourses, or with dancing.

They had a glorious bottle of champagne. Uncle Joseph drank it nearly all, and on parting shook Dick effusively by the hand,

promised to come again next day, and swore that his secret was as sacred as that of the Thirty-Third Degree.

He kept his word, and returned faithfully the next evening, when he had another bottle of champagne. How valuable a thing is a secret properly handled! Uncle Joseph rubbed his hands over his own cleverness. Why, it was almost like a return to the good old times, except that the bottle of champagne was not preceded by a Banquet. This caused unsteadiness of gait on the way home, and a disposition to laugh and sit on doorsteps, to become playful, and to find one's speech strangely thick. Dick's secret, however, was safe.

"Oh, my dear young friend," said Uncle Joseph, "what a happiness for you that it was I who discovered you; suppose it had been your father or Norah? What would have happened? I was in a Police Court this morning"—he certainly was a delightful companion—"I was in a Police Court, and there was a poor young man brought up for embezzlement. He had run away, and they found him, and he was committed for trial. I thought of you, Dick, and my heart bled. I'll come again to-morrow."

He did return next day, but meantime Dick had heard something which made him less careful to conciliate the man who had his secret. In fact, the word had come to be in readiness.

The Count had settled everything, and they were to go away the very next day. Therefore, when Uncle Joseph rubbed his hands, and said that it was thirsty weather, sent by Providence in order to bring out the full flavour of a dry, sparkling wine, Dick coolly said that he wasn't going to stand any more, but if Uncle Joseph chose to drink soda-and-whisky, instead, he could.

The old man was wounded in his tenderest and most sacred depths. But he dissembled, and drank the substitute, which, as compared with the Great Original, is little better than mere Zoedone. He drank it, and went away early, with treachery in his heart, but a smile upon his lips.

"Come to-morrow night, Uncle Joseph," said Dick, "and you shall have as much champagne as you can drink. You shall bathe in champagne if you like."

There was a Something, this injured old man felt, which meant mischief. He would not get the promised champagne. Dick wouldn't look like that if he meant fair

and honest. Yet how mean! How paltry! To grudge a single bottle of champagne, just one a day, for the safe guarding of so valuable a secret!

In the morning, Uncle Joseph made quite a long journey. He took the train from King's Cross to Bishopsgate, whence he walked to the Whitechapel Road. Here he took the tram which goes along the Commercial Road. He got out half-way down, and made his way through certain by-streets to Glamis Road, Shadwell, where stands the Children's Hospital.

By this time he had learned everything, partly by pretending to know already, and partly by cunning questions, and partly because Dick, with a brutal cynicism, made no secret of his own infamy. Among other things, therefore, he knew that Norah's pretended holiday was a blind to conceal from the Doctor for a while the fact that she had left her post as Private Secretary to Mr. Murridge, under an accusation of complicity, at least, in a crime.

He went first to Hugh, who presently called Calista.

"I thought," he said, in conclusion, "that the young man's friends ought to know. He may be snatched from worse evils, even if he is punished for what he has done. His father is a hard man, but he is, I dare say, just. And Dick is, I fear, in very bad company—very bad company indeed. There were cards on the table, and I fear there has been drinking."

He lingered, as if there was something more he would like to say. Presently he desired a word in private with Hugh.

He went away with a sovereign in his pocket. He had sold his secret for a sovereign. It was unworthy the Possessor of so many Degrees.

He spent the evening at a restaurant in the Strand over a large bottle of champagne, taken with and after a colourable imitation of a Banquet. There were, however, no speeches, because it might have appeared strange for an elderly gentleman to rise at his little table and propose his own health, and respond for the Craft. But the wine was Perrier Jouet, and he drank it slowly and blissfully.

If in these days of forced abstinence, the Tempter were to approach Uncle Joseph, holding a bottle of champagne in his hand in exchange for the Sublime Secrets of the Thirty-Third Degree, would his virtue sustain him in that hour?

CHAPTER XIII. A LAST APPEAL.

THE Count's preparations were complete. He had sold his club; he was going to take his pupil with him to some quiet place in Paris, where serious instruction in the Art of seeming to play fairly could be carried on without interruption. They were going to cross by the night-boat in deference to a newly-developed modesty in Dick. In the afternoon the Count came with a portmanteau containing all that was wanted in the way of temporary outfit.

"We will start," he said, "as we shall continue, as gentlemen. If we take furnished lodgings, you must not creep in with no luggage of your own."

He then proceeded to exhort and admonish his pupil to obedience, diligence, and zeal, all of which, he assured him for the hundredth time, would be rewarded by such success as his pupil little dreamt of, and by such dexterity as should make him the Pride of the Profession.

"Above all," he said, "Patience, coolness, and continual practice. You must never for a single day lose the steady eye and the quick hand. I have confidence in you, my friend. And you have everything to learn—everything. You can play a little and draw a little. You must learn to play well and draw well. They are accomplishments which will be useful to you. You must even learn to dance, because a man of your age ought to love dancing. You must always seem ready to desert the table for the ballroom. You must learn to fence, and you must learn to use a pistol. You are going into a country where men fight. You will cease to be an Englishman. Henceforth you will have no country. The whole world is yours, because you will command everything which the world produces. Are you ready?"

"I am both ready and willing."

"Good. You must learn to carry yourself less like a London clerk, and more like a gentleman. You must assume the air of distinction if you can. You must learn to laugh, and to smile. But all that will come in another country, and with a new language. Come," he looked at his watch; "only two hours more and we shall be in the train—the past gone and forgotten, everything before you new and delightful, not one of the old friends left—"

Here the door opened, and Dick sprang to his feet with a cry, and a sudden change in his eyes to the wildest terror.

"Dick!"

"Calista! You here! What do you want?"

She saw a table littered with cards. On the bed was a portmanteau, closed and strapped, beside it a hat-box and a strapped bundle. With Dick, and standing over him, was a man whom she had never seen; but, from Hugh's description, he looked like the foreign person who had called on Mr. Murrige.

"I want to talk with you, Dick—alone."

"You can talk, mademoiselle," said the stranger, "in my presence. I believe I may say that our friend here has no secrets from me—now."

"None," said Dick, emboldened by the reflection that he was under protection, and that Calista was alone. "No secrets at all. Say what you have to say, Calista, and get it over. You are come to pitch into me. Very well then."

"Oh, Dick, I do not come to reproach you. But—oh, Dick, Dick—how could you do it?"

"Never mind that now. What else do you want to say?"

"Have you confessed to your father, Dick?"

"No, I haven't; what's the good? Confess! Why, do you take me for a fool? Confess to him!"

"Dick, my old friend, there is another person to think of besides yourself. There is Norah."

"What about Norah? My father knows all by this time. But he hasn't got the cheques. Without the cheques there is no proof."

"If there are no proofs, come with me to your father and tell him that Norah is innocent."

"What's the use? He knows it already."

Calista pointed to the portmanteau.

"You are going away?" she said.

"I am going away altogether. You'll get rid of me, and never see me again. So now you will all be happy."

"Where are you going?"

"That is my business. You would like to go and tell my father, wouldn't you?"

"And how are you going to live?"

"Like the sparrows."

"Oh, Dick, you have in your head some wild and wicked scheme. What does it mean? You are deceived and betrayed by—by your advisers—by this man. Consider, Dick; no one knows except your father, and Norah, and Hugh. I will beg

your father to forgive you. Nothing need ever be said about it. All shall be forgotten, and we will go on as if this dreadful time had never happened—just as we did in the old days, when we were boys and girls together, and innocent—oh, Dick!—and innocent!"

"Listen to this young lady, Dick," said the Count softly, "and consider. There is still plenty of time to change your mind. Consider what she says. You will have a delightful time. Your father is never in an ill-temper, is he? He looks and talks as if he was the most indulgent of parents and of the sweetest disposition. Of course, he will never remind you of this little indiscretion—never. And he will trust you always—always. And he will advance you in his business and make you partner. And you will always live in this delightful suburb, where there is nothing. Heaven! nothing! Neither theatre, nor café, nor society, nor amusement of any kind. As for your secret, it is known to no one except three other people. Of course, they have told nobody; of course, they never will; so that there is no chance of the story being told abroad, and people will not point fingers at you, and say: 'There is the man who forged his father's name, but repented, and came back again, and was forgiven!' What a beautiful thing it will be all your life, to feel that you have been so bad, and that everybody else is so good!"

"Oh no—no!" said Calista. "It will not be so, Dick; it will not."

"I have considered," Dick cried; "I have made up my mind."

"And there is the office-boy, too, who found the last of the cheques, and put together those bits of paper. He will hold his tongue, too, of course. Consider well, Dick. You will live despised and suspected. Bah! To be a young man forgiven! The forgiveness will be a ticket-of-leave; the return to work will be under surveillance of the Police. You can never get promotion; you can never live down the past. Young lady, is not this true?"

Calista hesitated; then she took courage.

"Better this, better obscurity and contempt, than a life of wickedness. What is he to do? What do you yourself do? You play cards. Do you play honestly? Better the most humble life."

"Matter of opinion, mademoiselle. If he goes with me, I offer him—what? He knows very well that at least he will enjoy an easy life and profitable work, with

plenty of money in it, and society, and——"

"Oh, Dick, it cannot be possible! How should this man give you all these things?"

"Dick is a free man," said the Italian; "he is perfectly free. He can go with you, or he can come with me, just as he pleases. I understood that he had resolved to accept my offer, and to come with me. His portmanteau is ready and packed, as you see. But if he prefers——"

"I do not prefer; I will go with you. Go away, Calista! Repentance! Forgiveness!"

"Then, Dick, if you must go, before you do go, I ask you for one simple act of justice. Write me a letter clearing Norah altogether."

"I won't, then! After Norah's conduct to me——"

"Sir," said Calista, turning to the stranger, "you say that you are going to introduce Dick to the society of gentlemen. I do not quite understand how he is to take his place among gentlemen, or what gentlemen will receive him; but that is your concern. Will you kindly tell these gentlemen that this man made love to a girl whom he had known all his life, and, when she refused him, charged her solemnly, and in writing, with the crime which he had himself committed? I suppose you care nothing about his having stolen the thing himself"—Calista, in the satiric vein, surprised herself—"but perhaps——"

"I have forgiven him, young lady," the Count interrupted with a smile. "I have anticipated your own kindness, and his father's, and I have already forgiven him."

"But, at least," she went on, regardless, "you may have manliness enough left to blame him for accusing this innocent girl. She is my sister, and once his friend. Will you join him in making all that girl's future life miserable? It is not enough that you know, and I know, and her lover knows, the truth. This wretched boy has left behind him a paper to which his father clings as a kind of last chance that his son is not guilty, after all."

Dick laughed aloud, and Calista shuddered.

"I think," said the Count gravely, "that, if I were our young friend here, I should sit down and write a letter withdrawing the document in question."

"What's the good?" said Dick. "Of course, he knows the truth by this time."

"I should write a short letter, simply stating that this young lady—who must

be charming indeed to have diverted our friend's attention from his cards—is perfectly innocent. Our friend, thus forgiven by you, mademoiselle, and by me—presumably also by his father—and, we will hope, by the young lady concerned with himself in the matter, will embark upon his new career with a clear conscience such as you English love to possess, and a light heart, and an utter freedom from anxiety as to enquiry by detectives or unpleasant messages."

"No one will enquire, I am sure; no one will send any detectives after him. I think I can promise that. As for the money, Dick, Hugh sends me word that he will repay the whole for you."

Dick offered up, so to speak, a sort of prayer or aspiration concerning the destruction of Hugh. But he was well aware that the repayment of the money was about the surest way of securing himself from pursuit.

"Come," said the Count, "write, my friend—write this letter to the young lady, your old friend. Take the pen."

Dick sat at the table and unwillingly obeyed.

"Write. I will tell you what to say."

"Go on, then."

"My dear mademoiselle—or my dear friend——"

"Dear Calista," wrote Dick. "There, I knew very well what to say. Listen to this:

"DEAR CALISTA,—The paper which I gave my father about Norah was false from beginning to end. I made it up in order to stop him from taking up the Case himself. I thought that perhaps as he was so fond of Norah he would be staggered and let the thing drop. I thought he would rather believe it was me than believe it was Norah. And it lay between us. Norah did not take the cheques. Norah had nothing to do with them, nor had Daff. Norah presented one of the cheques for me, Daff presented one for me; and if I ever meet that office-boy, I'll wring his neck. You can do what you like with this letter. —Good-bye,

DICK MURRIDGE.

"There," he said, "take and give that to my father. Tell Norah I didn't mean, at first, to be hard upon her. But it was either her or me. And, besides, she had treated me so badly that I was savage. Tell her that I don't want any forgiving or nonsense. Who cares about forgiveness? All that I want is to be left alone."

"Oh, thank you, Dick!" Calista received the letter with softened eyes. "Norah forgives you, whether you want her forgiveness or not. I am very glad I found you. Now good-bye!" She held out both hands. "Oh, Dick!—poor Dick!—my brother Dick! be good, be honest. There is nothing else in the world worth living for. Be good, Dick."

Was it by chance or was it by design that the Signor's hands should be in his pockets at that moment, and that there should be the clink of coin?

"Nothing else?" said Dick. "There is money."

He turned his face away without taking her hands or being softened by the tears in her beautiful eyes.

The Signor stepped to the door and held it open while Calista passed out. Will there ever, in that unknown future which lies before this young man, fall upon him the memory of this last chance and the tears of the girl who was with him more patient than a sister with a brother, more ready to hear his sorrow, more sure to forgive, and more careful to excuse? Will he ever discover in the years to come that a life of obscurity with honour is better than the life marked out for him of trickery and cheating?

Exactly an hour afterwards another cab drew up at the "Hotel Entrance" of the tavern. There stepped out of it an old gentleman—none other than Uncle Joseph—and an elderly gentleman, who was Mr. Murrige.

"On the second floor?" you said.

"Second floor—first door on the left when you get to the landing. I'll wait for you down here. You can't miss him, and he's afraid to go out, because of you."

Mr. Murrige went slowly up the stairs. Any man bound on such an errand would go slowly. He was resolved what to do. There should not be the least appearance of anger. But he should demand a full confession. Otherwise— He reached the first floor and looked about him. Through an open door he saw a large room filled with little tables, the atmosphere thick with stale tobacco-smoke and the reek of spirits.

"The gambling club," he said, and mounted to the second floor.

He went to the door indicated, and opened it without knocking. The room bore signs of recent occupation; the bed had not been made since the night, and the bed-clothes were tumbled about; there were cards on the table, and a pipe, and a

jug which had contained beer. He thought he must have mistaken the room, and tried the next, and the next. There were some more rooms on the landing. They all presented the appearance of being family bedrooms. Mr. Murrige slowly came downstairs again.

"You told me the first door on the left," he said to Uncle Joseph.

"First door on the left it is."

Mr. Murrige this time sought the landlord in the bar.

The functionary who was in the bar explained that a young gentleman had been staying there some little time, but that he was gone—gone off in a cab that very day. Being asked if he kept a gambling club in the house, he said that he did not; he let his first floor to a social club, which met every night for conversation and tobacco. There might be cards. He did not know the names of the members; it was not his business. The young gentleman who had just gone away paid his bill regular, and was quiet and well-mannered. He kept indoors because he was recovering from an illness. He did not know where he had gone.

Nothing more could be got out of the landlord.

Mr. Murrige came away.

"Well, sir—well?" asked Uncle Joseph. "You have seen him, and made short work with him, no doubt. Ah, he was penitent, I trust! And you forgave him, on conditions—of course on conditions. It rejoices me to have been the humble means, under Providence, of bringing together father and son, under these most interesting and peculiar circumstances. Sixty pounds, I think you said? And five pounds for the humble Instrument. More Providence! Sixty-five pounds. It is a sad, sad loss."

"I promised you five pounds for putting the boy into my hands. Well, he is not there."

"Not there? Mr. Murrige, I give you the word of—of an officer in I don't know how many Lodges, that he was there yesterday."

"Very likely. He isn't there to-day. However, as you did your best, here's half-a-sovereign for you."

He gave the old man this paltry coin, which will do little more than purchase one bottle of really good champagne, and left him standing sorrowfully on the kerbstone.

Half-a-sovereign! And Uncle Joseph thought he had secured, at one stroke, a whole dozen of champagne!

CHAPTER THE LAST.

"My poor dear Norah," said Calista next morning—she had actually kept her secret the whole night—"is it not time that things should change?"

"They will never change for me," said Norah. "I have been thinking what I had better do. I never can go back to Mr. Murridge, that is quite certain; no one else wants a girl who can hunt up genealogies. I could not live at home doing nothing. I have made up my mind, Calista, to become a nurse. I will go to the London Hospital, and become a Probationer, and then I will be a hospital nurse."

"My dear child, you could not," said Calista.

"I could, and I will. Why, if Hugh could be a Doctor, and you can be a Sister, cannot I be a nurse? Besides, then I shall be in the same Profession as Hugh, and hearing something about him, though we are parted. I should go mad if I were never to hear anything more of him."

"Poor Norah! But suppose that it will not be necessary for you to do anything at all—suppose, my dear"—sisters do sometimes kiss each other without feeling the force of Hood's remark about sandwiches of veal—"suppose good news were to come for you?"

"There cannot be any good news for me. Why, Calista, you know that Mr. Murridge will hear of nothing until Dick has an opportunity of meeting his accusers. I, for one, have never accused him—and I never will. And now he has run away, is it likely that he will accuse himself?"

"Never mind what is likely. Think of the very best that could possibly happen."

"The very best?"

"The very best."

"Remember, Calista, it is not enough that Hugh should be satisfied. Of course he is satisfied. How can he ever love me unless he respects me? I must have much more than that."

"You shall have much more."

"Calista!" Norah caught her hand. "What have you heard? What have you done? Have you seen him? Have you seen Dick?"

"Patience, dear, for half an hour more, and you shall know all. Tell me, Norah, just this about Dick. Are you very—very bitter about him?"

"I don't know. He has robbed me of Hugh."

"He will give Hugh back to you. Can you forgive him?"

Norah hesitated.

"I know everything, dear; more than you know, even. Dick has gone. He has fled the country, I believe. There is nothing left us but to forgive him. He will never know whether you have forgiven him or not. But tell me that you do."

"Oh, what will it help him for me to say that I forgive him? I would not wish to punish him, nor to take revenge, and yet—Yes, Calista, I forgive him. Poor Dick! we loved him once, did we not?"

"Even if he does not know, it is something that you forgive him. Men's crimes follow them with scourges in their hands—scourges with knots in them, and every knot, for poor Dick, your vengeance and your unforgiveness. Now he will be punished less fearfully. My dear, your trouble is over. No one, not even the most spiteful, will ever be able to hint that there was the slightest truth in this monstrous accusation. No one except ourselves will ever know of it. Come, Norah, to Hugh's room. Someone awaits you there—a most important person, almost as important as Hugh. Come! A most delightful person; and oh, Norah, be prepared for the best news in the world, and for the greatest surprise you ever imagined."

Calista led her sister to the Resident Medical Officer's room, where they found, besides Hugh, a lady whom Norah recognised at once as Hugh's mother—Madame Aquila, the singer. She was in black silk, that kind of lifelong mourning which some widows adopt. Her face was kindly and soft, still beautiful, though her youth had long since vanished.

"My dear," she said, taking Norah by both hands, so that she could draw her close and kiss her comfortably—"my dear child, I have heard all. You have greatly suffered. But all is over now. Your sister has made the rough way smooth, and removed the last obstacle. See what it is to be a Sister in the Hospital; how helpful it makes one! And now you will take my Hugh again, will you not? He is worth taking, my dear."

"Oh," said Norah, her eyes running over, "Hugh knows that first—"

"Yes, my dear," Madame Aquila interrupted; "Hugh knows exactly what you intend. Not yet, then. We will wait a little."

They had not long to wait, for steps were

heard in the corridor, and the Doctor entered, accompanied by Mr. Murrige.

"Well, Calista," said the former, "I am here in reply to your letter. What have you got to tell me?"

"First, here is Madame Aquila, Hugh's mother. Next, you will have to keep perfectly quiet, and not interrupt for five minutes. And then I have got a Surprise for you. Such a Surprise!"

"Not another coronet, I hope?"

"And I am here, Calista," said Mr. Murrige. "I have brought with me a certain document in obedience to your request. What next? My son has left the country, I understand. What next?"

"First, Mr. Murrige, will you withdraw that document, and own to Norah that you have proved it to be false and treacherous from beginning to end, and then tear it up in our presence?"

These were brave words. Mr. Murrige heard them with some surprise.

"I have only to repeat what I said before. I withdraw nothing, and I acknowledge nothing, until my son has had a chance of explanation. I admit—I have never tried to deny—that the case against him is very black. But I will not condemn my own son unheard. The paper shall lie in the safe; the subject shall never be mentioned; Norah can come back as soon as she pleases. But if my son ever returns again—he has gone without a word—he shall have an opportunity of giving any explanation he pleases."

"Norah can never go back to you until that Document is destroyed, and its contents acknowledged to be false. More than that, she can never renew her broken engagement until you yourself acknowledge that its falsehood has been proved."

"I cannot help her, then," said Mr. Murrige coldly.

"I wonder if I might ask what is the meaning of all this?" asked the Doctor. "I was promised a Surprise, and it begins with a mystery."

"Presently," said Calista; "presently, perhaps. In the meantime, sit down and say nothing. I have got something to show to Mr. Murrige, and then you shall have your Surprise."

"Perhaps you have another so-called proof," Mr. Murrige went on. "I warn you that nothing—nothing but my son's voice—can convince me."

"Yet you are morally certain?" said Hugh.

"It is not a question of my opinion, but

of my son's honour. Go on, Calista. Produce your additional facts if you have any, and let me go."

"You shall have his own words, then." Calista produced her letter. "Listen to this."

She read aloud the letter which she had got from Dick.

Norah breathed a deep sigh.

"Why——" began the Doctor, about to ask how anyone in the world could be such an idiot as to suppose that his daughter Norah could be wrongly connected with cheques, but he was peremptorily ordered by Calista to preserve silence.

"Here is the letter, Mr. Murrige. Look at it. You know your son's handwriting. He gave me that letter yesterday afternoon at the place where he was lodging."

"At what time?"

"At six in the afternoon."

"I must have missed him," said Mr. Murrige, "by an hour."

"Are you satisfied now?" asked Calista. "Do you hear his voice in this letter?"

Mr. Murrige read the letter again, as if considering every word, whether it was genuine or not, and whether the signature was really his son's.

"The writing is my son's," he said, returning the letter. "What do you wish me to say?"

"Nay, Mr. Murrige; you know what you have to say."

He still hesitated. Then he drew a paper from his pocket-book, unfolded it, and handed it to Norah.

"It concerns you, Norah," he said. "Let me place in your hands the string of falsehoods which has given you so much pain. I cannot offer any excuses. I have no apologies to make for my unhappy son. You do not wish me to tell you what I think of him. I had but one son," he added sorrowfully. "As for that boy's father——"

"Oh no—no!" said Norah. "It is enough. Hugh, tear—burn—destroy this horrible paper! Let us never mention it again. Let us all agree to forget it. Hugh, tear it into a thousand fragments!"

Hugh placed it in the grate, and applied a lighted match to it. In a few seconds Dick's masterpiece was in ashes.

"I have one thing to say, Norah," added Mr. Murrige. "On that day when the facts were made clear to me, and the witnesses one after the other—the gambling man, and your brother, and the boy—showed that there was one, and only

one, guilty person, I would not admit the truth because there was the chance, the slender chance, that my son might have had something to explain—some kind of excuse. I even tried to persuade myself that there might be a conspiracy against him."

"He was your son," said Calista; "poor Dick!"

"At all events," said Hugh, "you might have trusted someone."

"Young gentleman, I trusted—my own son."

No one replied.

"I trusted my son," he repeated; "I, who have spent my life in calling those people Fools who trust anyone. Norah, will you come back to me?"

Norah looked at Hugh.

"No, sir," the Resident Medical replied, taking her hand; "Norah shall not work for you or for anyone else any more. It will be my happiness to work for her."

"In that case," said Mr. Murrige, "and as I have no longer a clerk, and time is money—at least, my time—I will go. Good-bye, Norah!" She gave him her hand. "I am sorry, my dear. You were a very good clerk to me, worth three times—nay, six times what I gave you. Well, I wish you"—he hesitated, and laughed incredulously—"I wish you what they call happiness in Love and Marriage. I do not quite understand what they mean by Happiness, but I think it chiefly means making believe, and pretending, and shutting your eyes to facts a great deal. If you do that, I don't see why you may not expect to be fairly happy if you have money enough. Of course that is the first thing. With the recollection of my example, you will naturally never place any hope or belief in the future of a child."

"Do not go, Mr. Murrige," said Hugh; "there remains something which concerns you. It is the Surprise, sir"—he turned to the Doctor—"of which Calista spoke."

"Now for the Surprise," said the Doctor. "After the Mystery comes the History."

"It is a Surprise about—about the Title," Hugh began. "It was as much of a Surprise, when I first learned it, as it will be to you and to Mr. Murrige. To you, I hope, not a disagreeable Surprise. And to Mr. Murrige—"

"Well, what will it be to me?"

"You will see directly. Were you quite sure, Mr. Murrige—perfectly sure, from your information and the enquiries you made, when you bought those reversionary

rights, that only two lives stood between the Doctor and the Title?"

Mr. Murrige started.

"Sure? Of course I am quite sure. The late Lord Clonsilla had two brothers. One of them died young, and the other died a few years ago without issue. The next heir was his first cousin, the grandson of the first Viscount and the third Baron. He it was who died the other day. But the papers took no notice of his death. The next heir is, without the least doubt, the Doctor here. There are other cousins; but they have no claim, and they may be neglected."

"That is quite right so far; but are you sure that the late Viscount had no children?"

"He had one son, who died young."

"He died at seven-and-twenty. He died, Mr. Murrige—to my mother's lifelong sorrow—in the second year of his marriage."

"What!" cried Mr. Murrige. "To your mother's sorrow?"

"To your mother's lifelong sorrow?" Mr. Murrige repeated.

The others, I am ashamed to say, not being genealogists, failed to catch the meaning of these simple words.

Then Mrs. Aquila supplemented them, saying softly:

"It is quite true; my husband was the only son of Lord Clonsilla. After his death, I went back to my profession and continued to sing. Hugh is my son. He is, therefore, if he pleases, Lord Clonsilla."

"You don't mean this, Hugh?" cried the Doctor, springing to his feet.

"It is quite true. If I please, I can call myself by that title," said Hugh. "Forgive me, Doctor. Forgive me, Norah. It is only a very short time since I heard this intelligence. But it is quite true. Tell me you do not regret the loss of the Title you had resolved never to wear?"

The Doctor gave Hugh his hand.

"Regret it, my dear boy! I rejoice. I have got sixteen threatening letters, all arrived within the last three days. Here they are, with the coffins and skulls and all complete. You are welcome to them, Hugh; only, my dear boy, you will be shot instead of me—"

"Oh, Hugh!" cried Norah.

"No, my dear," said her father. "On second thoughts, I'll keep the letters, and Hugh shall be safe. As for me, who ever went out of his way to shoot a walking general practitioner? And as for this

Title, it has been on my mind like a dreadful bugbear ever since I got it. Take it, Hugh—take it!"

"I don't understand this," said Mr. Murrige. "I don't understand this at all. If you think, any of you, that I am going to lose these estates, which I fairly bought, without a blow for them, you are mistaken."

"I do not at all expect that you will let things go until you are quite satisfied," said Hugh.

"I have issued orders to the tenants to pay up, under pain of eviction. I will evict them all, if I want the whole British Army at my back."

"On the contrary," said Hugh, "the tenants will be served with notices not to pay you any rent. Then it will be for you, I believe, to find your remedy."

"Poor Maria!" the Doctor sighed, "she is no longer Lady Clonsilla."

"I am sorry for her disappointment; but Norah will, I hope— No, dear," said Hugh; "let us have done, once and for all, with the gingerbread rubbish. There is neither a noble record, nor a long pedigree, nor a single great achievement preserved in such a Title as ours. There is not even the duty of maintaining a great family estate. Let us remain what we are, and, if I succeed, let me make a name worth having for those who come after us. This will be worth a thousand Titles. As for the inglorious coronet, with the memory of the ignoble services by which it was won, let it go."

"Yes, Hugh," said Norah; "let it go. We will begin afresh."

Just then Uncle Joseph appeared. He was hot and flushed, because he had lost his way in the network of streets between the Commercial Road and the High Street, Shadwell.

"Most important news, Mr. Murrige!" he said. "News worth telling; news worth hearing. I heard you were come down here, and I made haste after you."

"I want no more news," said Mr. Murrige. "I think I have had enough."

"There has been a steamboat accident—a collision. They have put back, and Mr. Richard, Mr. Murrige—Mr. Richard——"

"What? Is he killed?"

"No, sir, he is not killed. They have put back. His name is in the list of passengers picked up. He can be stopped if you please. You can have him arrested by telegraph; he is still at Dover."

Mr. Murrige made no reply. He put on his hat and walked away.

"Now, really, do you think he has gone to send that telegram?" said Uncle Joseph.

"And without a word of thanks."

He then became aware that Norah was in Hugh Aquila's arms, and that the young man was kissing her without the least affectation of concealment.

"Oh," he said, "I am glad that things are made up. It will take place soon, Mr. Hugh? I am very happy indeed to think of my part in bringing together two hearts which will not, I am sure, be ungrateful. Will the Ceremony of Initiation, I mean of Marriage, take place soon?"

"Very soon, Uncle Joseph," said Hugh. "As soon as we can arrange it."

"There is no ceremony," said Uncle Joseph with a sweet smile of anticipation, "no ceremony at all, next to the Inauguration of a new Lodge, where I am more at home than a Wedding Breakfast. On this occasion, Doctor—on this occasion, though our accession to the Peerage, actually to the Peerage, was allowed to pass unnoticed and unmarked in the usual manner—on this occasion I trust that Champagne will mark the day."

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THE INTRODUCTION.

CHAPTER I. — AMONG THE NARCISSUS-FLOWERS.

It was Eastertide in a wood.

If such things had been for mortal ears, they might have heard strange whisperings in the warm, soft air all fragrant with perfume of mosses and rich brown earth, all golden with spring sunlight. For the tall trees with their delicate tracery of new green leaf, the primroses with their pale, tender faces uplifted to the Easter sky, the slender daffodils with their golden bells, had each something to say to the other.

"Persephone has come back to us from the sad Land of Darkness. See! Where the hem of her garment brushed against the mosses as she hastened to greet her waiting mother, the wild flowers sprang into life, while her tender voice calling, awakened the trees! Oh, sorrowful Earth's children, we hear for you the message she left with us, that the Darkness is but waiting, that morning awakens the night! Persephone! Persephone!"

And then the wood, this spring afternoon, hushed its many voices and waited still and silent as a little group of mortal men and maidens passed by. Four girls and two men.

The girls in their dainty gowns, the men with that air of unconscious good breeding and careless faultlessness of dressing which

only Englishmen have to perfection, made, as they passed now through slanting rays of sunshine, now through flickering leaf-shadows, a very pleasant sight to behold. They were all carrying baskets of formidable dimensions, or rather all except one of the young men, who had apparently relegated his task to a great retriever trotting behind him.

"You are lazy, Mr. Linton!" exclaimed one of the girls who was walking beside the dog's master, a little ahead of the others. "Why don't you take that basket yourself, and let that unfortunate animal of yours have a scamper? I am sure he must be hating the basket—and you!"

The young man laughed lazily.

"I offered to carry yours, Miss Rashleigh."

"I'm sure you would have been welcome to it," said Miss Daisy Rashleigh. "It is an awful bother now it is empty. What it will be when it is full, I don't like to think. But then, you know, we made the rule we were to do everything ourselves. You know it is a good work!"

"It's awfully selfish of you, then, not to let any fellow share it with you. No good will come of it, you'll see."

Miss Rashleigh laughed, glancing up at him with a mischievously-provoking look, which already, novice in the art of flirting as she was, being barely seventeen, rarely failed in its effect upon a companion of the other sex.

"I dare say it is a dreadful waste of time," she said. "The flowers will be quite

dead by the time they reach London. It would have been better if we had made pictures of them; but then it was one of Hyacinth's experiments. What she will do when her ideas are all exhausted, I don't know. I often wonder what she will be like when she is old and grey, considering how flat and profitless she finds life now! It is always at one of these moments when she finds life particularly so, that she starts an experiment."

There was just the faintest touch of asperity or irritation in the last words as Daisy glanced round and caught sight of Hyacinth Craig—a tall, slight girl about eighteen, with an affected air of languor and weariness on her very handsome face, who was walking by the side of the one other man of the party. Apparently she had his undivided attention, for the two other girls were dawdling carelessly and contentedly a little way behind.

A decidedly mischievous look flashed into the eyes of Daisy's own companion as he saw the backward glance, and heard the sharpened note in the pretty voice.

"Danvers seems quite enjoying hunting for motes in the sunbeams," he said innocently; "but I am afraid he still smiles a little too much. I remark Miss Craig rarely smiles, and then only with an effort. Danvers should practise that effort. I'll tell him to murmur, 'Dust and ashes!' for a month every morning while he is shaving, and try and smile at the same time. It will probably give the right effect."

"I can't think how Hyacinth can be so silly!" exclaimed Miss Rashleigh petulantly. "Why can't she enjoy herself like other people—and let other people enjoy themselves too?"

"Or let them alone," said Cecil Linton so meekly that if Daisy had not been too preoccupied with her own disapproval of Miss Craig's proceedings, she might have suspected the genuineness of his humility. But the fact was, that ever since the day before, when Sir Charles Danvers had arrived at Oaklands, the residence of Mr. Linton and his mother, where the four girls were staying too on a visit, Miss Rashleigh had set him down as her own special attendant. Just as she had already established a kind of proprietorship in the private attentions of her host, to say nothing of at least two of the other young men forming the Easter house-party.

And Sir Charles Danvers was particularly interesting to her at the moment. He was unusually handsome—at least two

inches taller than any other man in the house; a splendid shot; and a waltzer who fulfilled even her wildest schoolgirl dreams. Now when all these fascinating qualities are displayed to the eyes of a very pretty girl, who combines all the delights of a new art with a very steady passion for flirting, to say nothing of a desire to be first even among her best friends, it was only to be expected that Miss Daisy Rashleigh did not at all approve of Sir Charles Danvers discussing a weary world with Miss Hyacinth Craig.

"How much farther have we to go before we reach this ghostly ruin of yours, Mr. Linton?" she asked a little petulantly after a few seconds' silence.

"Not very far. It's horribly tiring being good, isn't it?" suggested that young man sympathetically.

"I don't know why you should turn gathering flowers for poor sick people shut up in London alleys, into ridicule," exclaimed Daisy with dignified asperity. "But so you do everything that is at all good. I believe you are dreadfully selfish!"

"I know I am," he said with penitent meekness; "only you needn't cast it in a fellow's face. And here's the place already."

A grey stone wall stood before them. It was falling into ruins. Tufts of grass and ivy grew out of the cracks and cranies; mosses, green and brown, did their best to hide the weather-stains of years and gave it the tender touch of their own beauty. Inside the wall, was a plantation of fir and pine, which contrasted in a curious way with the fresh rustling of the new spring leaves of the wood beyond. Their sombre stillness gave a sense of desolation, which brought more vividly to their imaginations the story that Cecil Linton had told them of the place. More than a hundred years before, a man had been found murdered in the Chase, of which this wall encircled a part. The murder remained a mystery. The victim was a perfect stranger in the neighbourhood, and who had murdered him or what had been the motive of the murderer, no enquiries could ever discover, and the mystery had passed into one of the county legends. Mr. Linton improved upon it by telling the girls that the dead body had been buried in the Chase, and that the narcissus-flowers had bloomed in marvellous abundance ever since. It was to gather them that he had brought the

girls there this afternoon. There was no one to object, for the house itself had been uninhabited for years, the present owner, an eccentric old maid, living no one knew where.

All the party stood for a few seconds looking at the wall and the dark still firs beyond.

"It is the stillness I don't like," exclaimed one of the two girls who had been walking behind, looking up, her bright face slightly tinged with awe, at the great dark branches. For May Freeling was apt to be superstitious. "Is it really true, Mr. Linton, that the ghost of the man who killed the other is supposed to wander about there?"

"I don't believe it was the ghost of the murderer," said her companion, a girl with sweet true eyes and grave proud lines of mouth and chin, almost too quiet for her age, for she was only at the beginning of her woman's life.

"The poor man who was killed, must have had some friends who loved him. If anyone haunted the place I believe it was the spirit of someone who could not rest till he was found."

Miss Hyacinth Craig laughed contemptuously.

"My dear Violet! As his dearest friends would have probably forgotten him in life at the end of six months, is it likely their souls would have searched for him for a hundred years after? I should say he had found life not worth living, and killed himself instead of being killed."

There was a general laugh at Miss Craig's expense. Life was far too happy at that bright spring moment to most of them, to enter into such melancholy theories. Miss Craig smiled a little disdainfully. But the next moment, Mr. Linton, with the quick eye and practised skill of a schoolboy who has not lost his cunning, caught sight of and seized a footing in a crack of the crumbling wall. In another, he had swung himself on to the top of it, his well-made muscular figure standing balancing itself for a moment in its perilous position, while the loose stones rattled down on each side of the wall.

"Here goes for the ghost," he cried, "and hurrah for the narcissus-flowers!"

He sprang lightly down into the Chase, disappearing in a small avalanche of crumbling rubbish. There came a thud as he touched the ground, then the most absolute silence.

"O—oh!"

The silence was broken by a stifled exclamation of the most complete discomfiture.

"You are perfectly welcome," a sweet, clear voice, with just the faintest suspicion of laughter, replied to the exclamation.

The hearers on the other side of the wall, who had been frightened in the sudden silence, thinking he had hurt himself, stared at each other in dismay.

If they could have looked through the wall, they would have seen Mr. Linton standing facing a girl, at whose feet he had tumbled a second before, his face crimson with discomfiture and surprise.

"I might have killed you!" he stammered at last.

"Oh, no! I saw you coming," said the very sweet voice again. "I was only afraid you might bring down the wall and hurt yourself."

"I'm awfully sorry!" he began again desperately. "But the fact is, I thought the place was empty, and we came to get some flowers. I was going to open the door for the others. I don't know what you will think."

"You are perfectly welcome. I hope you will gather as many as you like. I only came yesterday, so you could not know there was anyone here. It is the first time I have walked here, and I was just thinking what a pity it was that there was no one to gather the daffodils. I will go and open the door. Please ask your friends to come."

She turned quickly and walked some ten yards down the wall, followed submissively by the young man, who had not yet recovered from the shock of being caught so unceremoniously trespassing.

The rest of the party beyond the wall, formed some idea of what had so silenced him, when, reaching the door in the wall which could only be unlatched from the inside, it was opened wide, and in the space, against a background of red boles of pine, stood the cause of his discomfiture.

A girl, tall and slender, with a face out of which looked at them a pair of most bewildering grey eyes, so dark that at moments they seemed violet blue. The thick fringe of eyelashes, almost black, made them look larger and deeper still, while hair of a wonderful shade of red brown, merging into golden, and a complexion of wild-rose tints, gave something almost startling to her beauty.

Three of the girls and Sir Charles Danvers looked at her in undisguised in-

voluntary admiration. But it had the strangest effect upon the other girl. May Freeling stood gazing at her with a kind of startled wonder which had something of repulsion.

"Oh, please come in!" exclaimed the girl in the doorway again. "There are such heaps of flowers, and there is no one to gather them. I am here all alone. There is only Miss Owen, who doesn't care about flowers at all!"

She reiterated the offer with an earnestness which was almost wistful. In some way, the wistfulness, added to the fact that she was clad in black from head to foot, gave a touch of pathetic loneliness to the girl, who complained that there was no one to gather her flowers. It struck and touched them all. She did not wait for a refusal, but led the way through the pines, whose sombreness apparently only formed a belt round the Chase, for a few seconds' walking brought them out again among the other trees.

And suddenly a sight broke on the eyes of the girls, which made them forget for a moment everything else. All the earth seemed literally covered with golden bells, and in a few minutes they were scattered among the trees, scarcely knowing where to begin to gather in the wealth of yellow flowers.

The owner of the daffodils stood watching them, but a curious change had come over her. The bright eagerness had vanished, and she stood still and silent, her black dress looking more sombre than ever in the midst of the golden glory of sunlight and flowers.

"I suppose it would be too great a tax on your charity to ask you to help us to fill our baskets?" asked Linton.

"I can give you my basket if you like," added Sir Charles Danvers with hasty generosity.

Neither of the men expected the strange, almost passionate longing, which flashed up into the beautiful eyes.

"Do you think your friends would mind my helping them? I should so like it!"

The look—the very pleading of the question discomfited them both.

Danvers was the first to recover himself.

"If you won't mind the trouble, I am sure they will be delighted," he said.

A smile like sunshine lit up the sombre depths of the grey eyes.

"If you think so—" she began hesitatingly.

"If you wouldn't mind sharing the

honour and glory of this basket," said the young man with an alacrity which was suspicious of considerable relief, "I'll carry it about, if you don't mind filling it."

She still hesitated; then with a quick movement, as if suddenly dismissing a doubt still troubling her, she moved in the direction of the other girls, while Danvers walked after her.

Linton pulled out a cigar, and dropped lazily down beneath the tree where the girl had been standing. He sat smoking and looking at the scene before him with the air of a man who had done his duty.

The girl in black had joined the others, and had been welcomed gladly apparently, for she was talking and laughing too. Linton noticed also that Danvers was always near her, and wondered with a little wicked amusement how Daisy approved of this new rival. Far more dangerous than Hyacinth had been, he could see by the intense admiration which had flashed into Danvers's eyes when he had first seen the girl in the doorway.

But this last recollection roused another train of thought.

He sat suddenly straight upright, and looked across to where Danvers and the owner of the Chase happened at the moment to be standing, a little apart from the rest, with a troubled, uneasy look in his eyes.

"I half wish I had put him off," he said to himself, "when I found mother had asked all those girls. However, I must keep him out of their way as much as possible. He'll have plenty to see if he really thinks of buying the place." A sharp spasm of pain contracted the young man's face, and he drew a deep breath.

But a little later, when they all came up to him with their baskets full to overflowing of their golden treasure, he greeted them with his usual lazy smile.

There was a great outcry at his indolence.

"It's my misfortune," he said in a sad tone, as he tossed the end of his cigar away and rose to his feet. "I'll try and do better next time." He glanced at their hostess.

"Oh yes, you will come again," she asked quickly, with the same curious note of entreaty, "whenever you want flowers, whether I am here or not?"

She stopped, hesitated in a curious kind of way, then went on. "My name is Laurent—Narcisse Laurent."

May Freeling, who had never once spoken

to her, but had always wandered away from the rest whenever the girl had joined them, started and looked at her strangely; but Miss Laurent did not notice it, and went on again.

"I shall be living here for good, I think, and I am sorry you are only on a visit to the place. I hope people will call; I am afraid it will be very dull if they don't," with a half glance back to where the house stood. "But it was left to me unexpectedly, and one of the conditions was, that I was to take possession at once, before even the repairs were begun."

She laughed a little. But the sound was sad rather than really amused, and she flushed a hot painful flush. She did not tell them any more about herself, except that she was going to live there with a companion—Miss Owen. They had both arrived the day before, and taken possession of the rooms which—the least in disrepair—had been hastily set in order for them by the two old people who lived as caretakers in the house. But the workmen were coming in next day, and so she hoped before long to make the place less dreary and desolate, as it was to be her home. And it seemed as if a sudden change had come over her, and her manner was shy and constrained as she wished them good-bye.

They all felt it, but nothing was said till they stood once more outside in the wood, and Linton had pulled to the door after them.

"Poor girl! I should say she had already found out that life is full of delusions," said Hyacinth with a faint sigh.

"She is lovely!" said Daisy critically, who was feeling very cross. "But she ought to be careful how she dresses. Her style is so peculiar that it would not take much to make her bad form—though I should like to paint her!" her artist soul struggling through her ill-humour.

"I think she is perfect!" said Violet Damer, with a degree of warmth which she rarely ever displayed. "Only she looks so very lonely."

May's lips parted, but she shut them again with a violent effort of will.

Neither of the men said anything. Probably they thought the more.

CHAPTER II.

OAKLANDS, lying about two miles from The Croft, was a beautiful old place, which had belonged to the Lintons for generations. There were only two mem-

bers of the family living there now, Mrs. Linton and her son, who about five years before had inherited his father's estate. The four girls, daughters of some of Mrs. Linton's old schoolfellows, with the two or three young men who formed the house-party this Easter, were enjoying their visit, as a visit to Oaklands only could be enjoyed. None of them suspected that the invitation had been given in the very bitterness of heart, and that this gathering would be the last that would ever take place in the house of the family which had reigned at Oaklands for so long. The dark clouds which had been threatening for years—clouds raised by follies and extravagances—had gathered so thickly now, that the storm was breaking at last, and Cecil Linton was to pay in full the debts of his father and forefathers. There was only one way to save himself and his mother from ruin. To sell the place over which his fathers had reigned for so many generations, and which during the twenty-eight years of his own life had grown almost part of his being. He had fought manfully enough to stave off the evil day, retrenching, with the help of his mother, on every hand, but it had been useless—as they both knew all along.

It was under these circumstances that Mrs. Linton, to whom all girls were dear, for the sake of a dead daughter, had invited these four girls—daughters of her dearest friends—to spend a month with her. And the girls, seeing none of the clouds, had voted the visit a perfect success. They had danced, and ridden, and flirted, and played tennis, and enjoyed themselves generally. They had been capital friends among themselves, during those spare moments when they were not bewildering the minds of the young men who formed the other half of the house-party at Oaklands. For a fortnight, perfect peace had prevailed. Then a slight cloud arose. One of the young men who had hitherto studied with assiduous devotion the secrets of a hollow world, suddenly and without apparently the slightest cause, went over to the frivolous conversation of Miss Daisy Rashleigh.

Miss Hyacinth Craig, unaccustomed all her life to having a single fancy thwarted, or to be overlooked for another, with this one more proof of the hollowness of life, grew more weary and melancholy than ever. It was in this mood that she suddenly discovered the theory, that to supply æsthetic pleasures to the East End was the only thing worth living for. The daffodil gathering was this theory turned into practice.

She had rigorously excluded all the men from the party, and had only yielded after much persuasion to the entreaties of Cecil Linton and Sir Charles Danvers.

A little cloud, in spite of the success of the daffodil gathering, seemed to rest still in some intangible way upon the party. Perhaps the girls were tired with their long walk. Perhaps the vague sense of antagonism between Daisy and Hyacinth affected them all; but, at any rate, they were all rather silent, and some of them decidedly cross that night at dinner. Sir Charles Danvers, seated between Daisy and Hyacinth, was lazy, and only roused himself to expatiate on the beauty of the new acquaintance they had made that afternoon. And the girls, with the quickness of girls in such matters, saw that his fickle man's fancy had been taken captive, and that their own fascinations were vain. Though neither really cared a bit about him, this desertion piqued their vanity. It was only a passing phase of feeling, one of those cross-currents which are always in some way or another disturbing the steady flow of daily life; but it is these eddies which by their very unexpectedness, sometimes cause the greatest shipwrecks.

A large party had been invited for music and dancing at Oaklands that evening. The guests came from all the neighbouring houses, and as they sat listening to the music and talking, one of the chief topics of conversation was the arrival at The Croft, and the new acquaintance that the daffodil gatherers had made that afternoon. Everybody in the room was interested, the closing of the house twenty years before, having been a county wonder. On the death of the last owner, a Mr. Munro, the place had been left by him to his only child, a daughter, who had already shown signs of extreme eccentricity. The first thing she did on her inheritance, was to shut up the place, leaving in it only two servants, and then disappear herself.

From that time no one had ever seen or heard anything of her. To-night, everybody had something to suggest or ask. Was Miss Munro really dead? Was the new arrival any relation to her? Perhaps Miss Munro had married in her curious retirement, and this might be her daughter. If so, why had the girl taken possession so suddenly and secretly? As was natural, considering that no one knew anything at all about it, no definite conclusion was come to. Only one person took no part in the conversation; and yet, as she heard all

the vague speculations, it was the hardest matter in the world for her, to keep back the information, with the desire to repeat which, she was bubbling over. It needed to be a strong doubt indeed, to keep May silent. As a rule, she said what she thought first, and repented afterwards.

"We must find out who she is, of course, before we call," said a lady, the Honourable Mrs. Seton, who had a large family of daughters, and had been one of the most interested in the discussion going on. "When one has daughters it is impossible to be too careful."

There was a sudden cessation of music at the other end of the room as Daisy Rashleigh rose from the piano. In the sudden stillness, the clear, high-pitched voice of the Honourable Mrs. Seton was distinctly heard.

"I'm growing quite tired of Miss Laurent's name!" explained Daisy petulantly to May Freeing, as she shut up her music. "I can't see why they all want to talk about her so much!"

"They would be considerably surprised if they knew who she really is," exclaimed May Freeing unguardedly; "I should like to see Mrs. Seton's face if I told her."

"You know who she is!" exclaimed Daisy quickly, "and there's something queer about her, I can see, by your manner."

The next second she had turned and faced the room, the swift movement prompted by pique and wounded vanity.

"What do you think, Mrs. Linton?" she exclaimed, in clear, distinct tones. "May Freeing knows all about Miss Laurent. Do make her tell us."

Everybody looked towards the piano where stood the two girls.

"I don't know if I ought to tell you," said May, in answer to half-a-dozen questions. Then her strong inclination to amuse, stimulated by Daisy's subtle prompting, combined with the flattering interest of the whole room, overcame her generous resolve to keep the story to herself. "You mustn't let what I am going to say prejudice you against her, for I am sure it was only wicked gossip when people said she knew more of it than was right. Do you remember a dreadful murder, committed in Baltimore two years ago? But I don't think it was put in the English papers. It was Amy—my brother Malcolm's wife—who told me all about it. She is an American, and came from Baltimore; and the murder was the talk of the town just before she left. A poor old lady

was murdered one night there. And, to make it more dreadful, murdered by a man to whom she had been very good. His name was Townsend, and Miss Laurent is his daughter."

There was a murmur of shocked incredulity.

"She has changed her name, naturally," went on May, forgetting everything but that she had a very interesting story to tell. "Poor Miss Metcalfe was found murdered in her sitting-room. Mr. Townsend had come in late that evening to see her, and no one saw him leave. But when about twelve o'clock at night her maid went to see why she had not come up to bed, she found her dead. It was proved against Mr. Townsend. He was condemned to death, but died suddenly in prison. He had a daughter, but no one even knew her by sight, as she was still at school. But as it happened, she was staying for a week with Miss Metcalfe, just before the murder. She disappeared the day before, and was never heard of or seen again, though every enquiry was made. The worst part was, that when Miss Metcalfe's will was read, it was found out that she had left the whole of her property to this girl. It certainly all looked very suspicious, and it does seem funny that that girl should have come so secretly, and be living there in such a big house."

"Oh, May," exclaimed Violet, who was listening too at the farther end of the room; "it sounds so dreadful, when you think of Miss Laurent. It can't be the same girl."

"I think Miss Freeling must be mistaken," said a stern voice. And Cecil Linton, who had been sitting near Violet, rose, and looked across the crowded room to where May Freeling stood by the piano. May flushed hotly. Then the feeling that she was being called to account before the whole room, irritated her.

"It is not likely I should make a mistake about such a matter, Mr. Linton," she said hotly. "Amy pointed her out to me one day in London. She knew her by sight, because she happened to be at a railway station in Baltimore the very day that Miss Townsend arrived. She heard Mr. Townsend introduce her to another man as his daughter just home from school. She was only about sixteen, but Amy noticed her then specially, because she was so lovely. Of course, after the murder, she remembered her well."

"It is a terrible story!" exclaimed Mrs. Linton, coming hastily to the rescue,

and with a look at her son not to continue so unpleasant a subject. "And the less said about it the better. I think we had better keep it to ourselves. We shall soon be able to judge what Miss Townsend or Laurent, really is."

But Smalleross society, constituted after the fashion of other societies, could not keep so interesting a piece of information to itself.

Miss Laurent's history, as given by someone "who knew her very well," was carried away from Mrs. Linton's drawing-room that night, and spread by energetic repetition through the county. The Honourable Mrs. Seton, the social leader of Smalleross, gave out that it was impossible for respectable people to call on her.

And the history, percolating downwards from "the county" proper through all grades of social standings, reached at last even the country folk, whose information, gathered from relations acting as servants in high places, took strange and varied shapes. By the end of a fortnight it was known as a positive fact that Miss Laurent, living at The Croft under an assumed name, had helped to murder Miss Munro, after forging the will which gave her the property.

CHAPTER III.

ABOUT a fortnight after their first daffodil expedition, the four girls staying at Oaklands, made their way once more through the woods in the direction of The Croft. They were alone this time, and their faces were very grave, while more than a suspicion of tears stained May's and Daisy's eyes. But for once neither thought of appearances.

"She won't see us, I know," exclaimed May with a catch in her breath, as they drew near the grey wall. "She will have been sure to find out that it was I who started the reports. How was I to know people would behave so rudely to her?"

"It wasn't all your fault. It was mine quite as much!" exclaimed Daisy. "It all came of wanting to be first, and then being mean and jealous."

"Yes, it was," was on the tip of Hyacinth's tongue, as a passing thought of the defection of her promising disciple stung her. But she checked herself. Personal feeling was out of place in the general repentance of the moment.

"We have all been enjoying ourselves too much, that's my opinion," she said instead. "It has made us selfish. If only

we had stopped to think that disappointment follows every pleasure, we should not have been so wrapped up in them, so as to forget to be considerate to other people."

And for once—made to reflect in the presence of another's shadowed life—these "careless daughters of ease" discerned the principle of truth which lay buried beneath the affectation of Hyacinth's pessimist philosophy, and forbore to mock at it. It was Violet Damer who had prompted this expedition with the object of trying to atone in some way for the harm they had done the girl. "We can beg her pardon, I suppose; that is all we can do," she had said, when the others, shy and ashamed, would have held back.

It was Hyacinth's suggestion that they should go to the same place, and see if they could find her there, lest, if they went up boldly to the hall door, she might, thinking their visit an impertinence, refuse to let them enter. They had never been here since that first day. The narcissus-flowers had faded and withered in stifling rooms of the East End, and none of their fresh sweet sisters had been sent to take their places. For the last fortnight of their visit to Oaklands had been spent by the girls in a whirl of gaiety, and they had found no time for such far-off charities; while life had been displaying its other side to Hyacinth's melancholy eyes, and there had been nothing to prompt new experiments. It was only this morning that they found out really how far and wide Miss Laurent's history had spread, and how much harm it had done her.

They felt now that their absence after their promise to return, would be interpreted after the bitterness in Miss Laurent's own heart.

"I wish we had told Mrs. Linton that we were coming, and asked her to come with us. Of course Miss Laurent will think that we stayed away just for the reason the others did," said May.

"Well, we must put up with it," answered Violet laconically. "If you like to go back I shall go on," unconsciously giving the key-note to her character.

But if they had wished to, it was too late.

They had just reached the doorway in the wall when it was pushed open, and the girl they had come to seek, stepped out into the wood.

She had her hat in her hand, and the sunlight falling on her from between the branches overhead, lit up her hair into a wonderful glory. But her face was so

white, and there were such heavy circles round her eyes, that the girls could only stare at her for a second in shocked surprise. If they had wondered whether she had heard all the reports spread about her, her looks answered them. At the sight of them, a hot, scarlet flush dyed her face and throat with the agony of shame, then with a swift gesture she drew back. But Violet recovered herself and ran forward.

"Oh! do you mind waiting a minute?" she exclaimed, scarcely knowing what she said in her anxiety to keep her. "We came to see you——"

Miss Laurent turned at the pleading voice, and faced the girls.

"To see me?" she asked. "Why do you want me?"

If the girls had been shocked at the physical change in the beautiful face, they were still more startled at the mental transformation. They had thought of her through it all, as troubled and full of sorrow, with the tender pathetic appealing, almost child-like, in the grey eyes, which had been there on the first day they saw her. This girl, with her hard face and repellent bitterness, abashed and discomfited them. If there had been any condescension of pity in their repentance, it was slain by her scorn. Even Violet drew back ashamed.

But May, whose every moment was ruled by impulse, flung herself into the gulf suddenly opened between them.

"Oh, you hate us! And I don't wonder," she began passionately; "I hate myself!" And the next second, with choking words and broken sentences, she poured out all her share in what had taken place.

Miss Laurent's face grew paler, but she did not say a word.

"And if I lived for a hundred years I should never forgive myself!" wound up May, sobbing outright at last.

Miss Laurent looked at her for a second. "I don't know why it should trouble you so," she said in a clear, hard voice. "But I am glad you came. It gives me an opportunity of explaining. I ought to have told you the other day who I was. I know now that things like that can never be hid. I knew it before, only I was over-persuaded."

"I'll never repeat anything again as long as I live!" sobbed May, in the depth of helpless repentance.

"Please don't take such a rash resolution on my account. Life would not be half so amusing," she said, "and as I said before, I have nothing to forgive."

"We don't ask for your forgiveness!"

said Violet, flushing shyly but speaking bravely; "or rather, we ask for much more. We ask for your friendship. We are all going away to-morrow. But we want to feel, that when we come back again you will be here to hold out your hand and welcome us."

A faint flush tinged Miss Laurent's white face. The earnest proposition, with its genuine feeling, pierced the hardness of pride which wrapped her in. Violet saw the startled wonder and the softening, and went on more earnestly.

"If we did not come back for twenty years, we would still ask you the same. Be generous and believe us!"

"Twenty years! A great many things will have happened in twenty years, and one of them will be, that you will have forgotten me!" The hard voice grew strained and hoarse. Then with a slight gesture of self-contempt she exclaimed: "After all, what does it matter? It is not likely that we shall ever meet again."

"None of us may ever meet again," said Hyacinth, with melancholy solemnity. "How can we tell what even one year may bring us?"

Daisy gave an impatient little shiver.

"How gloomily you are all talking! If life does not mean brightness I don't think it is worth living! And I am sure it is our own fault if it does not."

But May, in her impulsive fashion, had caught at an idea.

"Why should we not prove our theories?" she exclaimed eagerly. "Twenty years! It is a long, long time—long enough to prove anything. Suppose we agree to come back here in twenty years' time to tell each other what life has been to each one. And you," turning swiftly to Miss Laurent, "you too, will come back to tell us that bright days have come to you as well."

Miss Laurent shook her head. But the others took up the idea as eagerly as May.

Twenty years from this spring day, they, girls no longer, but women who would have proved the things that life brought them, should, if they were living, return to that place and give an account of their lives.

"Why should I promise to come?" exclaimed Miss Laurent, in answer to their entreaties. "Our lives are set so far apart that they cannot join again. You ask for my friendship now—because you are sorry. In a month's time—even less—you would be ashamed of it, if I gave it to you. I will not take advantage of an offer you will regret to-morrow."

"Come only, and see!" cried the girls. She looked at them, not bitterly now, but very sorrowfully.

"No," she said, "I will not come, unless life has given me something else to say."

Then she turned and went back into the Chase, shutting the door behind her.

A silence fell on the girls.

"Is that life?" asked May, breaking it, in quick half-frightened tones.

"Yes!" sighed Hyacinth.

"Perhaps!" said Daisy.

"No!" said Violet.

Then they too turned and went their way; and as they passed out of hearing, earth's glad voices broke out once more:

"From Shadow to Sunshine! From Silence to Song! Oh, Persephone, teach us the patience of waiting!"

THE LADY OF DIS.

CHAPTER I.

THE parish church of Smalleross was unusually full. The beautiful May day had attracted all the world, and gentles and simples poured from the sunny, thyme-scented world outside, into the quaint old church.

The bell was stopping, when a girl entered the church alone.

She came up through the sunshine which fell on the broad aisle through the stained windows; and, ominously enough, as one nervous old maiden lady distinctly observed, one crimson ray fell in a patch of red light upon the black gown, even staining for a second the round white throat. There is a different way of looking at most things; and while the poor old lady descanted upon it afterwards to her friends as a direct sign that she ought to be avoided, one young man thought of the martyrdoms which were being suffered every day by the innocent for the guilty. This girl's father committed a horrible crime, and all the world tried to slay her life too. But then he was a foolish young man, who had, hidden away under a rather selfish exterior, certain views upon chivalry and honour. But Cecil Linton, being outwardly no better than most of his fellow-creatures, and having, after the generality of his sex, a very good opinion of himself, did not always gain credit for these hidden depths of feeling. And very probably, as man is weak, it was the beauty of the girl which brought them to the surface this morning.

It was the first time Miss Laurent had appeared at the parish church since her arrival at The Croft, a month before. But she gave no consciousness of all the curious eyes watching her as she made her way to the pew belonging to The Croft. She did not even turn her head, when a momentary disturbance at the back made the rest of the congregation look round. It was caused by one of the schoolboys, who, in his anxiety to see more of her, had climbed up on to a pile of books he had arranged on the footboard, with the result that the books and himself lost their balance and rolled to the bottom of the pew. He was marched out ignominiously to undergo his punishment. The service came to an end, and the congregation began to disperse. Outside the porch door stood a raised flat stone, whose original use was unknown; but it had been turned to an ingenious account by one of the churchwardens, whose devotions and sense of personal dignity were apt to be disturbed by refractory conduct among the school children. When, as had happened to-day, any boy or girl had distinguished himself or herself in the wrong way, he or she would be stood on this stone as in a kind of pillory, in the sight of all the out-going congregation. This morning the pillory was graced by the luckless wight whom curiosity and restlessness from heat and weariness combined, had led to his so signally disgracing himself during the service. The sight of his good companions hurrying off to their dinners while he had to stand there, with the prospect of a long sermon from the aforesaid churchwarden, in addition to the durance vile, awakened in his soul such a sense of personal injustice and grievance generally, that it proved at last too strong for his self-control. The sight of Miss Laurent at the church door was the spark to the tow. The rage and defiance pent up in his bosom went forth in one shrill cry:

"Who killed Miss Munro and forged her will?"

The next second his voice choked in his throat, as he was lifted bodily from the stone by a strong hand inserted in the collar of his coat. The continuation of the scene, to his confused senses, was a violent shaking—a vision of a pale, stern face bent close to his, muttering some words so fierce in their tone and import, that he thrust up a defensive elbow—of a shocked murmur of voices—and the being handed over by

the same powerful hand, to the school-master for condign punishment.

Smallcross, really shocked by this public expression of its private opinions, broke up into groups and families, to discuss the painful scene on the way home. The young man, who had fallen upon the culprit with such swiftness of wrath, was already striding down the lane outside the church, and scarcely conscious himself of what he should say if he did overtake the slender, black-robed figure passing swiftly on in front of him. He was recalled to his senses by a hand laid on his arm. His companion, Sir Charles Danvers, had caught him up.

"You can't do any more, Linton. She'd hate you if you spoke to her now. I could see that in her face. It is all the pig-headed narrow-minded idiots of Smallcross she has to thank for that young one's impudence, confound them!"

CHAPTER II.

"YOU had no right to go without me. I told you to wait till next Sunday. If only I had gone this morning, only my head ached so."

Miss Laurent, standing in front of her companion in the drawing-room of The Croft, with her things on just as she had come straight in from church a few minutes before, laughed a little grim laugh of half-amused, half bitter scorn.

"What would you have done? You would only have borne it. There was nothing else to be done. There is nothing else to be done, as long as life lasts!"

"Don't be tragic, Narcisse! It is silly and bad form," exclaimed Miss Owen, angrily. But the anger was only the outcome of her sympathy for the girl, who had been so shamed and hurt. "What did you go for? You should have gone into the town as we have been doing."

"I thought I had courage to face a little place like Smallcross. But I don't think I shall ever be able to again. It was bad enough to know that it said such things; but to hear—"

"Smallcross is only a corner of the world. Surely you didn't think you had strayed on a new planet, with a new order of beings who didn't talk."

"No," said Miss Laurent, and she laughed bitterly again. "It is only the sameness of the things they say and do which upsets me. If only they would sometimes be generous and—forget."

"But you are so impatient. You don't give them time; you expect too much of

human nature. You must remember that things are against——”

A sudden change swept over the girl's face, lighting up the bitter pain of her grey eyes into a passionate blaze.

“Don't, Miss Owen! You are forgetting your promise, that whatever you might think in reality, you are to act and speak as if there were no such dreadful thing as that background to my life. If I did not live with some one who believed, as I believe, that my father was innocent, I should go mad—mad!” The words ended like a stifled cry.

It was not often that Narcisse gave way like this; but the one or two glimpses Miss Owen had had behind the veil of a certain defiant hardness, in which the girl generally wrapped herself before the world, showed her how terribly she suffered beneath the shadow of that dark past, and Smallcross, where her lot was cast, was not going to make the shadow any lighter.

CHAPTER III.

BUT the next afternoon an event occurred which filled Miss Owen with triumphant pleasure and hopes for the girl's social future. As Miss Laurent returned about five o'clock from a walk in the grounds, she was met at the door by Miss Owen in a perfect flutter of excitement.

“Who do you think has called this afternoon? Mrs. Linton from Oaklands, that big house at the other side of the wood, and her son came too; and she has been ill ever since you came, or else she would have called before. You can't think how delightful she is, and he——”

“I've seen him before; he's very conceited,” was the ungracious reply. But Miss Laurent had flushed hotly at the mention of Mr. Linton's name, for he had been very pleasant, too, that day in the woods. Yet he had forgotten her as the girls had done.

And now he came to-day with his mother out of pity. Had not they done the same? Trying to make reparation when it was too late.

“But the worst of it is,” went on Miss Owen as carelessly as she could, feeling that this was the vulnerable point, “she is leaving Oaklands to-morrow, for good, I fancy. She was evidently in great trouble. It is such a pity for your sake; she would have been just the friend for you to have.”

But the girl was hurt to the very soul.

“Ah, I see why they came; only be-

cause they are going away at once. I wish they had not called; I hate them for calling——”

“Hush, Narcisse, my dear child!”

Poor Miss Owen gazed aghast, past the girl to the open door, in which stood a man's tall figure. He had come up unobserved, and must have distinctly heard Narcisse's indignant speech; but if he had, his face gave no sign. It was quiet, and tinged with a certain lazy self-superiority habitual to it, which Miss Laurent had set down to conceit.

“I must apologise for coming back to bother you,” he said politely, as he raised his hat to the two ladies gazing at him, “but my mother found after we had driven a little way, that she had lost her card-case, and she thought she might have dropped it here. As she has several more visits to pay she sent me back to see.”

Miss Owen caught eagerly at a way out of the embarrassment. It was so very awkward that, just at a time when Narcisse wanted friends, she should risk losing them by her hotheadedness.

“I dare say it fell among the cushions,” she exclaimed hastily. “She was sitting on the couch over there. Narcisse, this is Mr. Linton. I will go and look.” And the good lady bustled off, feeling that Narcisse ought to be shaken for her folly.

The two, standing near the door, bowed to each other at the informal introduction, Narcisse stiffly, the young man pleasantly.

“I am sorry to give you all this trouble,” he said, as she stood still and ungracious, while her companion turned over the cushions at the other end of the hall.

“It is no trouble,” she said stiffly.

A slight twitch at the corner of the young man's mouth betrayed his sense of the position.

“It is very tiring looking for things on a hot day like this,” he said, then added with hasty politeness: “I had better go and help Miss Owen.”

The next minute he was actively engaged hunting under cushions, shaking fur rugs, and peering under furniture with the keenest anxiety to find his mother's card-case.

“It is most extraordinary! Mrs. Linton said it was so beautifully cool here that she would not go into the drawing-room, Narcisse. I was sitting here reading when she arrived, and—where can it have gone to, Mr. Linton? It must be here somewhere.” And Miss Owen, standing up,

flushed and flurried with her energetic search, appealed in puzzled conviction to that young man, as his head appeared, too, from the other side of the arm-chair, under which as a last possible place he and Miss Owen had both been searching.

"It is most extraordinary!"

"It is," said the young man promptly. "Some evil spirit bent on the destruction of morning calls must have spirited it away."

As Miss Owen and the young man stood up now, politely exchanging regrets concerning the trouble, and expressions of disappointment that the search had been vain, Miss Laurent looked straight at the young man.

He met her gaze steadily enough for a second, then the corners of his mouth twitched again, then he grew very red.

"I must not keep you any longer," he said hastily. "I am afraid I have given no end of trouble."

"Why did you do it?" asked Miss Laurent gravely; but there was an odd flickering reflection in her own dark eyes, of some light in his. "You really have given Miss Owen a great deal of trouble."

"Oh, Narcisse!" exclaimed poor Miss Owen, shocked beyond measure. "Please tell Mrs. Linton that I will look again, and that it shall be sent up at once if it is found."

"Please don't trouble any more!" exclaimed the young man, with quite alarmed earnestness, as he shook hands with the good lady. "I shall never forgive myself if you do."

When he reached the door he hesitated, a melancholy penitence pervading his manner and appearance. Miss Laurent gravely held out her hand.

"I hope Mrs. Linton has not been waiting all this time," she said politely.

"No," he answered hastily, his face brightening visibly as he took the hand held out to him; "I begged her to go on. I am going to take a short cut across the fields, and meet the carriage at the vicarage."

Mr. Linton walked down the drive with the same becoming gravity, till a curve in the avenue shut him out from view of the hall door. Then he laughed outright.

"Could she have seen me pick it up from beneath poor Miss Owen's very nose?" he exclaimed to himself. "Surely it wasn't sticking up out of my pocket for her to see all the time!"

With anxious alarm he felt his pocket. No. There at the bottom well hidden, lay the case, as he had hastily thrust it away when he had caught sight of it the instant he began his search.

"It was awfully mean of me! Poor Miss Owen! But I couldn't help it! I wish I could have kept it up longer! How lovely she looked in the doorway, with the sunlight on her like that! She is a girl who ought always to stand in the sunshine. How angry she was at our calling! If she only knew how willingly we would do more for her! And now even that is beyond our power."

The young man's lips contracted with sharpest pain. He had told his mother, who had not been at church, of what had taken place yesterday, and shocked as much as he had been, she had called this afternoon upon the girl. That one short visit was all she could do, for already Oaklands had passed from their hands. She was leaving the next day, the doctor having insisted upon her going away at once, while all the final preparations and arrangements for giving up her old home were made. Cecil Linton was to stay on a little longer.

The young man did not join his mother at the vicarage after all that afternoon.

The thought of what the morrow was bringing, drove away the haunting grey eyes of the girl who had raised it. As yet he had known them for so short a time, but the home of his fathers had been with him from his birth. It was a bitter cup to drink, this having to give up, for no sin nor folly of his own; and he drank it to its very dregs as he wandered aimlessly that May afternoon through fields and lanes.

It was nearly dinner-time when he found himself in a copse on the borders of the Oaklands grounds. The nearness of the home brought back the remembrance of the card-case.

He pulled it out of his pocket and looked at it with a comic ruefulness stealing into his pale face.

"What on earth am I to do with it? If I give it back to mother, it might come out that I had it all the time. Miss Owen was so bent upon finding it, that she might come up in the morning to inquire for its welfare. I wish I hadn't done it. How angry poor Miss Owen would be if she guessed! I should never dare appear there again."

A clump of late daffodils, springing up from a soft bed of moss, caught his eye.

A sudden inspiration seized him. The next second he had dug a hole with his stick and buried the little leather case under the moss, the clump of daffodils marking its hiding place.

"An appropriate ending to a fool's search!" he said. "For I was a fool to linger even that short time near those grey eyes. What have they to do with me as my life now is?"

CHAPTER IV.

SIX months later, Oaklands was given over to cleaners and decorators, and when they had departed, the new owner, Sir Charles Danvers, accompanied by a maiden aunt, took possession.

They had been at Oaklands about a month, when one morning at breakfast, Sir Charles looked across the table to where his aunt sat pouring out the coffee.

"By-the-bye, I want you to call on Miss Laurent, at The Croft, to-day, if you can; for I mean to ask her to the ball, if I give a house-warming."

Miss Nash stared at him over the coffee-pot.

"But, Charles—I really wouldn't. In the first place, it isn't for me to call on her first, and—in the second— Oh! I couldn't think of such a thing. I have heard no end of things about her since I came. Nobody calls on her."

"That's why I want you to go there. For naturally, under the circumstances, she won't come here."

"But I couldn't! It wouldn't do to take up people like that. Besides—she is so impertinent too. Some people did call on her—second-rate sort of people, you know, who I suppose are glad to know any one—and she would not receive them, and never even returned their visits. And it was the same with the Vicar's wife, who called out of charity. Mrs. Seton says she is most objectionable. She gives herself such airs, and passes people when she does meet them as if they were dust under her feet."

And Miss Nash grew quite brave and decided as she expressed her opinion on such a subject.

"You mean that instead of taking all the Smallcross insults meekly, she defies them," said her nephew carelessly. "It is shocking taste, I admit."

"Rather, Charles, you must own. A girl whose father was hanged, and who herself——"

"Her father died, and was not hanged, and there was no prospect of Miss Laurent being hanged, if that was what you were going to say. That is a deliberate little invention of Smallcross to give flavour to its tea."

"I don't care," said Miss Nash quite doggedly. "I have never called on criminals, and can't begin now. Poor as I have been, I have always managed to keep up my position."

"Very well," said her nephew carelessly. "You can do as you like, of course. I asked you here to be civil to my friends. If it is too troublesome a task you can always leave. You must please yourself."

The perfect indifference of his face, almost cruel in its coldness, spoke more plainly than his words. His aunt's thin face, faded and lined with weary poverty, flushed, and her lips suddenly trembled.

That afternoon, in fear and trembling, sitting well back in the corner of the brougham, lest she should be met or seen by the Honourable Mrs. Seton, Miss Nash drove to The Croft.

Miss Owen happened to be sitting at the drawing-room window as the Oaklands carriage drove up.

With a sudden, desperate impulse, she flung down her work and hurried out into the hall, to waylay the servant going to open the door.

"We are at home, Simpson," she said breathlessly, then rushed back to her seat and caught up her work, trying to look as if she had not moved.

"Narcisse will be very angry," she said to herself. "But things can't go on like this. The girl's character is getting completely spoilt by this unnatural hardness and defiance."

Miss Nash had perfectly described the attitude taken by Narcisse Laurent. Mrs. Linton's visit had not been accepted by Smallcross as a precedent. It had kept aloof, treating the girl with marked suspicion and coldness. Perhaps matters might have improved if the girl herself had been patient. But she was hot-headed and passionate. The shadow on her life had made her bitterly sensitive. Instead of waiting, as Miss Owen counselled, she grew rebellious and hard, and never lost an opportunity of showing her disdain. She refused to have anything to do with Sunday schools, or blankets, or mothers' meetings, all of which her companion, without the least consciousness of mixing up worldly and charitable wisdom, en-

treated her to undertake, as a borderland where she would have the opportunity of meeting "the county." But Miss Laurent was not to be persuaded.

But this afternoon Miss Owen took the matter into her own hands. All this was telling on the girl. She was growing paler and thinner. The beautiful colour seemed to fade at times into a red stain beneath the eyes, and the grey eyes themselves were brilliant with a light that was not a girl's laughter. This isolation must be broken down by some means.

A few seconds later Miss Nash was announced. She was scarcely seated when Narcisse entered the room. A warning, appealing glance from her companion checked her annoyed astonishment at seeing a stranger there.

"This is Miss Nash, Sir Charles Danvers's aunt, Narcisse," she said quickly, after having introduced her to that good lady.

"It was very kind of Miss Nash to waive ceremony by calling on us first," said Miss Laurent quietly, with a manner such as a duchess might have used when correcting an unwarrantable impertinence. The discomfort of poor Miss Nash was complete.

Perhaps her helpless confusion and the honest distress of her eyes, touched the delicate good breeding that was innate in Narcisse's heart; perhaps Miss Owen's appealing face had something to do with it. Whatever it was, the next second Narcisse was sitting by Miss Nash's side, bright, and courteous, and fascinating, as she only could be. Half an hour later, Miss Nash drove home fairly bewildered, torn between two diametrically opposed convictions—that the county must be right, and that a girl of such dainty high breeding could not possibly be what the county had said she was. Miss Nash's reasoning powers not being of the strongest, she found it perfectly hopeless to try and reconcile these two contradictions.

CHAPTER V.

THAT visit was only the beginning of the intercourse between Oaklands and The Croft. Smalleross's indignation knew no bounds when it saw Sir Charles Danvers a constant visitor at the latter place. For Miss Laurent had changed her mood, and "the shameless way," in Smalleross parlance, in which she did her best to establish a footing in the county by ingratiating herself with Sir Charles, was a scandal. Many were the lectures poor Miss Nash received,

the voice of the Honourable Mrs. Seton expressing public opinion. But poor Miss Nash was fairly ruled by her iron-willed nephew, while, though she dared not confess it, the fascination of the girl herself was strong upon her.

The discovery that invitations had been sent to The Croft, for the great ball that Sir Charles was to give as a house-warming, was the climax to the general dismay. Even Miss Owen was doubtful on the subject. She was surprised at Narcisse accepting the invitation, and wondered how she would go through the ordeal. But she need not have been afraid. The spirit that had made Narcisse accept, gave a recklessness to her courage, as it gave a brilliance almost startling to her beauty. As she entered the ball-room that night her dazzling loveliness amazed even the two men standing near Miss Nash as she received her guests. They both came quickly forward; but while Sir Charles eagerly asked her for dances, the other only shook hands and then moved away.

"I did not know Mr. Linton was to be here to-day," she said with a bright smile, as she and Sir Charles joined the dancers.

"I met him in town yesterday and made him come down," answered Danvers carelessly. "Perhaps it was a little hard on him. I didn't think at first. I wonder he came. But how awfully well you look to-night!" in a different tone. "Only you are not wearing my flowers."

The tone jarred upon the girl. It always did, and to-night, in her over-strung mood it was intolerable.

"My maid said they spoilt my dress," she said with almost insolent carelessness. "They had yellow centres, and she said I was to wear only white."

Callous as the man generally was, he winced; but when he looked down again into her face he forgot the hurt of her insolence.

"Your maid was right," he said. "Even to see you wearing my flowers, I would not have you change one single thing in your toilette to-night. There is not a woman here who can stand by your side."

She knew that he was thinking of her position in the room—unrecognised, unknown—there, at his wish alone. She was thinking of it herself. The feeling that all eyes were watching her and all tongues criticising her, was like the cutting of a knife into her living flesh, and as she danced, or spoke, or laughed, its hurting never ceased.

But it angered her that he should think of it.

"What difference can it make to you whether I am well-dressed to-night or to-morrow, or the day after?" she said with hot disdain.

"A great deal—and you know," he began, roused out of himself by the power of her loveliness. For the half cynical admiration with which he had first regarded her, had developed into the nearest approach to love, of which his selfish unbelieving nature was capable. He did not believe even in her. Though she had encouraged him, he was clever enough to know, that it was only another way of resenting public opinion. But for all that, because she was the only woman who had ever been to him what she was, and because he never failed to gratify a selfish desire, whatever it might cost him afterwards, he meant to marry her. But he must wait. He felt her shrinking away from him now at the very sound of his passionate words.

"I am tired of dancing," she said; "take me back to Miss Owen."

He submitted, and took her back without another word. He understood her better than she did herself. He could afford to wait.

As the evening wore on there was not a girl in the room who seemed to enjoy herself more than Narcisse. Sir Charles, without forcing himself upon her notice, surrounded her with care. He even saw that his aunt talked to and looked after Miss Owen, who sat lonely among the chaperons. But that good lady did not trouble in the least about any slights to herself. She saw Narcisse besieged with partners; the men, long before the evening was half over, basely going over to the enemy's camp in crowds, fairly fascinated with the girl's beauty and brilliance; and Miss Owen triumphed at Narcisse's success. But as the dance went on she grew doubtful.

In Miss Owen's young days to dance twice with a man was all that was permitted; yet here was Narcisse giving away half-a-dozen waltzes to one man, and sitting out two or three with another, and then throwing one half of her partners over for their dances, to give them in capricious favour to others, after a fashion which utterly shocked poor Miss Owen's old-fashioned notions. Was the girl's head turned with all the homage of the men? Was she growing perfectly reckless of public opinion, careless that she was

shocking the women and driving them more and more away from her? Driving away others, too, for her chaperon noticed that Cecil Linton never once went near her all the evening.

Perhaps he, too, was thinking how his mother, whose gentle high breeding had taken Miss Owen's heart captive, would disapprove of these proceedings.

Miss Owen's distress growing every dance, began to display itself in irritation; the result of which was that, when Linton came up to ask if she would have any refreshments, she answered him very snappishly in the negative.

He looked a little surprised, as well he might, for the last time he had spoken to her she had been very pleasant. But he took no notice, only lifted up a flower-covered fan by her side and sat down.

"I am afraid chaperons have rather a dull time," he said.

"I should think the dancers sometimes have a duller, judging from their partners. How Narcisse can have had the patience to dance three times running with that horrid man I don't know."

Linton looked up. Narcisse was just passing them. She nodded and smiled to them, and was swept on again.

The young man watched her for a second or two, and then his eyes fell again to the fan which he was still holding.

"She seems to be having a good time," he said.

"A good time! I suppose you call a good time for a girl dancing with any goose in the room. Apparently, it isn't a man's idea of a good time, as you have stood out half the evening," said Miss Owen, very irritably indeed.

"I have danced as much as I wanted to," said Linton, who, after the fashion of young men, only danced when and with whom he pleased.

But he looked tired to-night, and perhaps there was some excuse for his laziness. The waltz was ending, and both suddenly seemed to forget their conversation, in watching Narcisse.

There was a look of relief in both their faces as they saw her, instead of following the other dancers out of the room, come towards them.

Linton knew the man, and hated to see any girl of his acquaintance dance with him; yet Narcisse had given him three, and had even thrown over another partner for him—Linton had heard her doing it. Narcisse dismissed the man with a careless

smile, as she came up to where the chaperon was sitting.

"How could you dance with that horrid man?" exclaimed Miss Owen as he moved away.

"I don't know, I am sure," replied the girl carelessly. Why did I, Mr. Linton? you look as if you knew."

"Because you hated him," he said.

Their eyes met for a second; then hers fell, and with a little impatient gesture she sat down.

"Give me my fan," she said, "it is better than your suggestion."

"Shall I recall it?" he asked with a smile, as he stood looking down at her.

She did not want to meet his eyes again. Something in their cool searching, in their steady disapproval, had changed a dull disappointment which had haunted her all the evening into something like anger. Why should he call her to account?

But some other feeling conquered her, and she looked up; and as her eyes met the smile in his, her own flashed into sunshine.

"I danced with that man because I was angry and cross," she said, "and I did it out of perversion of spirit. I hated him all the time."

He laughed. "So I was right. Will you give me this dance, to prove that you aren't angry?"

Miss Laurent was already engaged to three men for this particular waltz. But she scarcely hesitated a second, and then the hesitation was not caused by the thought of her other unfortunate partners. She was only wondering again why he had not asked her before.

A few seconds later she was whirled down the long hall, now guided by the strong arm of Cecil Linton. Neither spoke a single word. As the tender melodies of the waltz gathered themselves up into a breath of plaintive minor chords he drew her quickly from the room. He led her down a corridor, till they came to a recess in which stood two seats.

"Was not I right?" he said, when a few seconds later they heard voices and laughter, and frou-frou of women's dresses, as the dancers streamed out of the ball-room. "I always think that rush and noise at the end, spoils a waltz such as that was—to me."

She laughed a little nervously. He was holding her fan again.

"I don't think you ought to wear these things," he said, touching a trailing spray

of white orchids on it. "You should only have narcissus-flowers. Do you know I always think of you gathering yellow flowers in the sunlight, behind that old grey wall. I hope you still do it?"

"Not now," she said; "it is winter."

"It ought to be always spring where you are, then. It was always spring when Persephone appeared on the earth."

"Persephone!" she said, with a quick catch in her breath. "Don't liken me to Persephone. Don't you remember that she had another name too. 'The Lady of Dis.' Don't you remember how one half of her life was spent in that land of darkness. Have you forgotten that mine——"

He looked at her quickly.

"Hush!" he said quickly, "you must not say any more. Your life need not be spent in the land of darkness. Don't you remember how Persephone ate the pomegranate seeds? It was foolish of her!"

"And you think that I am wilfully eating the pomegranate seeds too!" she said with an odd little laugh, as she sank back again in her chair. "Perhaps I am. For I have been hard, and angry, and bitter, and——do you know that I thought to-night that even you—who were once kind to me—had gone over to the other side, and were misjudging me like the rest? And you had known me a little——while the others——perhaps I have expected too much."

He did not lift his eyes from the fan, whose flowers he was arranging with a lingering touch.

"It was because I had known you that I did not," he said in a strained voice. "I did not dare. I was no longer master—I had no right."

It was a mistake that he did not look up, for such a lovely light flashed into her face, that had he seen it, he would have dared all, even to asking her with her wealth to share his ruined fortunes. But it passed in a second.

"I should think, Sir Charles, that you have had a taste of asking such people to your house. Anything more disgraceful than Miss Laurent's conduct would be impossible."

The Honourable Mrs. Seton, sweeping down the corridor with Sir Charles Danvers in attendance, came suddenly upon the two sitting half-hidden by the palms and ferns in the recess.

She had not seen them. There was an almost imperceptible pause of discomfiture

as her eyes fell on the girl; but before, haughtily drawing herself up, that stately matron could pass on, Miss Laurent rose and stepped out of the recess.

"I think it is time we went home, Sir Charles," she said, looking up into his face with her most brilliant smile.

"Must you really go?" the young man exclaimed eagerly. "I will go with you, and order your carriage. Linton, will you take Mrs. Seton back to the ball-room?"

That young man had risen too, as Miss Laurent had hastily left his side. He appeared pale under the light of the lamp overhead, and his eyes looked a little bewildered as they rested on the face brilliant with mocking disdain, which a few minutes before had been uplifted pale and tender to his. Was it the same girl?

A little later, as Sir Charles was carefully wrapping up Miss Laurent in her furs and putting her into her carriage, Linton came back to the seat. The flower-fan lay there as he had put it down when he rose. She had forgotten it. Linton broke off a spray of the orchids.

"She will not miss it," he said, "and if she did, she would be too good to ask for it back. Another second, and I should have made a fool of myself. She saw it and was merciful."

Merciful! Was Persephone merciful to the sons of earth when, in wanton wilfulness, she ate the pomegranate seeds, whilst they were waiting with longing eyes to behold her amongst them once more?

Two days later, Miss Nash started forth on a round of visits, to announce the news that a marriage had been arranged between her nephew, Sir Charles Danvers, and Miss Laurent, of The Croft.

CHAPTER VI.

SIR CHARLES and Lady Danvers went abroad for three months after the wedding, and it was a day in the beginning of June when Sir Charles brought his wife back to Oaklands. Miss Owen and Miss Nash, between whom had sprung up a very genuine and unexpected friendship, were waiting at the house to receive them. After dinner they went back to The Croft, where it had been arranged by Narcisse that they were to live, and husband and wife were left alone in the house which was to be the home of their wedded lives.

Was Narcisse wondering what sort of home it would be, as she stood alone after dinner in the great drawing-room, looking round it?

She was still standing there when her husband entered. He laughed a little as he saw her.

"You don't look real, somehow, Narcisse," he said. "Perhaps it's that white frock, which gives you a kind of diaphanous appearance. Perhaps I am not used to seeing you here yet, and expect to see you vanish like a spirit."

"But I can't," she said. "I'm here for always."

"I suppose you are," he said, laughing again, and putting his arm carelessly round her. He had not tired yet of her beauty, but its winning had cooled his admiration. "It's a fine room, isn't it? It was awfully rough on the Lintons having to give it up. Do you know it was in this very room I heard all about your story? That little Freeling girl entertained us with it the evening after we met you. I shall never forget what a rage Linton was in about it. But I don't believe the girl meant any harm. She was only a little chatterbox. Awfully amusing, too."

Narcisse had withdrawn herself from his arm as he spoke.

"She must have been," she said with intense bitterness, looking suddenly away, "for the people could not forget it."

"Come, I say, Narcisse, you mustn't be too hard on people. After all, it was rather startling to hear that you had been mixed up with a murder. Half the people fancied you had helped to administer the poison yourself."

"Don't!" cried Narcisse passionately. "Do you want to make me wish that I had never been born?"

He stared at her in amazement.

"What a little spitfire you are, Narcisse!" he said impatiently. "It is impossible to know how to take you. One minute you laugh; the next, you blaze up like this, and there's never any more reason for one mood than the other."

"It is my nature," she said. "You knew what I was like. Why did you want to marry me?"

As yet she could not offend him very deeply, and his ill-temper vanished.

"Because I couldn't help myself, I suppose," he said, laughing lightly. "You bewitch a man before he knows there is danger."

He would have kissed her, but she had moved away; and he flung himself down into a chair and took up a book; but he did not open it, for happening to glance, still angrily, over to where Narcisse stood by a

little table, he sat upright and stared at her.

He had bought an early edition of an evening paper as they came down from town that afternoon. As it happened, neither of them had looked at it. It had been brought into the drawing-room with some books of Narcisse's, and when she had turned away from her husband she had taken it up. She was holding it now in her hands, looking at it.

"What is the matter, Narcisse?" he exclaimed in alarm, as he rose and went quickly over to her.

She raised her eyes to his, with a dazed look in them, and an awful whiteness on her face.

"Nothing," she said in a still, hushed voice.

"Nothing?"

A paragraph caught his eyes as he looked down at the paper in her hands. It was headed: "Strange confession of a murder," and was an extract from a Baltimore paper.

In a few lines it gave a graphic account of the murder of a Miss Metcalfe some two years before, for which an innocent man had been condemned, only escaping the extreme penalty of the law by dying suddenly of a heart disease. The real murderer, a good-for-nothing connection of the poor old lady, and who had managed to escape all suspicion, had confessed to the deed a few days previously, as he lay dying from a wound gained in a drunken brawl. The names were given, with a few remarks upon the melancholy miscarriage of justice, which had dishonoured and virtually slain an innocent man.

Sir Charles read it through.

"Nothing!" he echoed. "Do you call that nothing? To have your father proved an innocent man!"

But with a dull, moaning cry, which sounded like "Too late," she fell forward in a dead faint.

CHAPTER VII.

SMALLCROSS always looked upon the insertion of that paragraph in the "Smallcross Gazette," for it also appeared the very next morning, after the return of Sir Charles and Lady Danvers, in that extensively circulated journal, as a *Deus ex machina*. In those few dozen lines lay the kernel of the hard nut it had been trying to crack. Smalleross swallowed that kernel in one mouthful of relief and thankfulness, and with it any envy and spite which

might have added to the difficulty of the cracking, and straightway besieged Lady Danvers's doors.

Lady Danvers received them with a quiet manner which touched Smalleross, not expecting it, and affected its different members after various ways. Only it was agreed upon one point that, though it would have been very unpleasant to have to avoid a house like Oaklands in its daily life, it would have been still more unpleasant for Lady Danvers to have been so avoided.

There was only one person of all those who knew her, who read another meaning than meekness in that unexpected gentleness. Miss Owen, understanding the girl as no one else did, and learning by familiar intercourse to understand the man who was her husband, began to be afraid.

It was wonderful how much information Smalleross picked up in a week about Lady Danvers's previous history, when it had once made up its mind to look at it from more than one point of view.

It found out that Narcisse Laurent, whose mother was a French Canadian, was a distant connection of Miss Munro. That eccentric lady was still alive, living in a distant town of America, no one knowing of her existence but her lawyers in England, who, on pain of her displeasure and loss of business, were forbidden to mention her. She had hated Smalleross as a girl, and hated it still, connected as it was with a love story which had ended all astray. She had come across those distant connections of hers in America, and had been good in her way to the girl whose mother had died when she was a baby, and whose father, a gambler and a spendthrift, had little to do with her. In fact, the only home life Narcisse, who grew up in schools, had ever seen, were the occasional visits she paid to Miss Munro and Miss Metcalfe, an acquaintance of her father's. She had been on a visit to the latter, having just left school for good, when the terrible event took place. As it happened, she had left her suddenly the afternoon before the murder to go to Miss Munro, to ask help for her father who was in great difficulties at the time. It was nearly three days' journey, and when she arrived she found Miss Munro nearly out of her mind with the news of the murder. The discovery of the will, leaving all Miss Metcalfe's money to the girl, was the last stroke. She refused to believe in her kinsman's innocence. She almost accused the girl herself. She insisted upon her staying

there, declaring that she would only make matters worse by appearing at the trial, as she would only be another witness to his desperate straits at the time of the murder, and as her father also wished it, Narcisse stayed. As Miss Munro lived in strict seclusion, no one knew that she was any connection even of Peter Townsend's. When the trial was over, and Narcisse's father condemned, she made the girl change her name; and Narcisse, still refusing to believe in his guilt, took her mother's, saying that she at least would not have been ashamed of her bearing it. After his death in prison, Miss Munro sent her to Europe to a school in an out-of-the-way German town, as far from herself as she could, declaring that she would not be disgraced by having such connections near. After two years, with one of those sudden caprices which governed her mode of living, she sent for her to return to England, and gave instructions to the lawyers that they were to find her a companion and send her down to The Croft, the only reason to be given for her residence there being that the place had been left her.

But her pleasure when she heard that the girl whom she had really cared for, in spite of her apparent hardness, had done so brilliantly for herself, overcame all other feelings when the news of the marriage reached her, and the first thing she did was to settle The Croft upon her as a reward of her success.

Smalleross also found out, by dint of judicious inquiries and reasonings, that the part of Miss Freeling's story relating to Miss Laurent's enjoying the fortune of the dead woman was but a repetition of scandal which had been rife at the time. Miss Laurent had never touched the money. It was left in the hands of the executors, she refusing to have anything to do with it. Miss Munro's allowance was amply sufficient to keep up The Croft. All these details were wonderfully entertaining gossip for Smalleross, and it discussed them as it discussed anything that came into its midst, and when it had done with Lady Danvers's past it turned again to her present, and found still more to say thereon. For a great change had come over her. She and her husband went up to town for the end of that season, and even in that short time London went wild about her. Her beauty, her toilettes, her brilliance, carried everything before her. Before three years she became one of its

leaders of fashion. People schemed and struggled to get invitations to her house. Invitations poured on her.

"You are killing yourself," Miss Owen remonstrated with her one day, after two years of this life.

"I am not," she replied; "I am only eating the pomegranate seeds."

"I don't understand you."

"It is better for a woman when she does not understand such things," said Lady Danvers, with a little catch in her breath.

"It is that wretched husband of hers!" thought Miss Owen, more disturbed than ever. "It is he who is driving her to this. If it were not for her child she could not bear it."

But it was not the husband's selfish neglect and worse which had driven Lady Danvers into this vortex of excitement and amusement. It was as she said—she had eaten one pomegranate seed, why should she not eat the rest of their bitterness?

CHAPTER VIII.

"BY-THE-BYE, Narcisse, whom do you think I met in town yesterday? Linton. He has been knocking about all over the world since his mother died two years ago. I made him promise to come down here to-morrow."

There was a large party of guests at Oaklands, who had come down from town for the recess. As they all sat round the luncheon-table, chattering and laughing, they scarcely heard the careless remark made by their host to his wife. It scarcely seemed as if she heard it herself. She made no reply, and the next second one of the guests asked her some laughing question, and she turned and answered it. And she laughed too, but the sound seemed far off and strange in her own ears, and the next moment she even wondered why she had laughed.

When the luncheon party broke up, Lady Danvers, with a dim, dazed look in her eyes, went away to her room. She was scarcely conscious where she was going, she was scarcely conscious of anything. She had forgotten her guests, she had forgotten her husband. Her brain had only room for one thought. Cecil Linton was coming to-morrow! She could form no other thought—what she would do, what she would say. How would she meet him? He was coming—that was all!

With blinded eyes she went on.

Her feet stumbled as they struck against something on the floor. A child's broken

doll was lying in her path. Disfigured, and paintless, and armless—a poor dilapidated object, yet brought to this very dismal condition by the eager affection of the baby whose plaything it was. The child had dropped it in coming or going from her mother's room. Mechanically Narcisse stooped to see what had made her stumble. With a little inarticulate cry, she caught up the poor waif of dollhood, with its staring eyes and tangled flaxen hair, straining it to her heart in a shock of remorse, and fear, and pain, as if it had been some living, sacred thing. Was not it sacred for the baby arms which had nursed it and carried it? And her straying, careless feet would have trampled on it as they went blindly on in their despair.

"Oh! how wicked I have been!" she said as the tears rained thick and fast upon the broken plaything. "How wicked I am!"

Cecil Linton came down the next day. He arrived in the afternoon, when Lady Danvers and all her guests were assembled in the great hall for tea.

They had not once seen each other since the night when they had parted at the ball. They met quietly, almost like strangers. It was easier to meet like this before all these other people. Narcisse, with all those listeners round, could talk to him and ask him about his life, and laugh at his adventures as she would have done to any other man. Her social training stood her in good stead. And yet, as she caught every now and then, when he fancied she was not looking, a searching gaze, with something in it very like shocked wonder, she nearly faltered.

What was he seeing in her to study like that? The evening passed away, and the next day. And the day following he was to leave.

Narcisse counted the hours. The agony of them was almost insupportable. But the agony of fear mastered the pain of his presence—fear lest she should by look or word betray herself to him. None of her guests who heard her laugh and talk, and saw her the most brilliant of them all, guessed what torture she was going through. Linton neither sought her nor avoided her. He went his way with the other guests, and made himself popular and agreeable in the old rather lazy fashion. He had still the manner which made some people call him conceited, and perhaps this manner, with its complete coolness and self-contentment, helped Narcisse to fight

the battle against herself better than anything else. She no longer wondered why he had come down. He had long ago forgotten that folly for which she was paying so dear to-day. The morning of the day that he was to leave, he came into the morning-room where she was. For the first time since his arrival he found her alone, she having always surrounded herself by her guests, to avoid any such meeting. She was standing near the window looking out, with her walking things on. He sauntered up to it.

She did not look round till he was close to her, though she heard him coming. As she turned, the strong light fell on her face. He started, and again that almost shocked question came into his eyes.

With a little impatient movement she pulled forward the curtains to shade her face from the too-searching sunlight.

"What do you see in my face?" she said. "Wrinkles and crowsfeet already? I am not twenty-two yet."

He smiled slightly.

"Did I look as if I meant to ask such an indiscreet question?" he asked.

"You looked as if you thought I was a fright. Charles says I am. He told me yesterday that I had fallen off dreadfully. I think he was quite angry about it. He told me that if I did not get any colour I ought to rouge."

The young man looked at her keenly, but he still smiled.

"Are you going to?" he asked.

"No," she said shortly.

He looked out of the window for a second or two. Then he turned and glanced round the room. It had been his mother's favourite room, this low-ceiled, high-wainscoted apartment, with its view from the windows of sweep of lawn and clumps of stately trees. His father had brought her to the house a bride, just as for generations his forefathers had brought home here their brides. Now he stood there an alien, and—

He passed his hand over his moustache and stood for a second pulling it after a fashion he had.

Then he turned suddenly to Lady Danvers.

"I will tell you what I think of you," he said cheerfully; "you are the least curious woman I ever met."

"Am I?" she asked, laughing a little in her relief at his tone. For there had been something in his face, as he looked out of the window, that had made her afraid

again. In some way, though she could not define how, the expression recalled the one she had seen on his face as he came forward that night to take Mrs. Seton back to the ball-room.

"Yes," he said triumphantly; "you are proving it. You don't even ask why I think so."

"I will then now—to prove you wrong."

"Ah! but you don't care in the least for all that, do you? Do you mean to say that you never wondered in the least little bit what became of that card-case?"

She stared at him, then broke into a merry laugh.

"I know you found me out," he said, with melancholy remorse. "If it is any expiation I can tell you that I have never ceased to be haunted by the recollection of Miss Owen's energy and kindness that hot afternoon."

"If I remember, you gave yourself a great deal of trouble too. What did you do with it?"

"I buried it," he said. "Will you come out and look at its grave? I could take you straight to the spot. So much does remorse for an evil deed impress it on the memory."

She looked out at the garden, then up at him.

"I will go and visit its grave," she said brightly.

They stepped out of the French window and went down laughing and talking together to the copse. The birds were singing in the branches, sunshine and shadow chased each other like fairy feet across turf and moss. Daffodils made all the world look yellow.

They reached the spot where he had hidden the card-case.

"Do you see how the flowers have sprung out of its grave?" he said tragically, pointing to a great cluster of daffodils.

"A Basil plant," she said laughing.

"No. A beautiful possibility changed at its death into flowers," he thought. But all that he said aloud was: "Unfortunately for the sentiment of the thing, there were some flowers here before. I used them as its tombstone."

He began to dig with a piece of stick, while she stood by, wrapped up in her mantle, watching him.

But, alas, for the card-case!

After a careful search, all that could be found were a few mouldy shreds, which required a great deal of imagination to convert into the dainty thing he had buried.

He stood ruefully inspecting them as they dangled on the end of the stick.

"Would you please tell me what you did such a very foolish thing for?" she asked, gingerly touching the mouldy remains with her finger.

"It was foolish, was not it? But I was a fool, and I suppose a fool is known by his ways, and you would hardly believe it, but these ruins make me think of ghosts."

She drew back quickly. The hasty movement made him look up. The next second the stick was tossed away and the remains forgotten.

"What is the matter with you, Lady Danvers?" he asked in eager distress. "There is something, I am sure. I saw it the moment I arrived. You are ill!"

"I am not ill," she said almost harshly.

"What is it, then?" A sudden remembrance of the character of the man she had married made him turn white to the lips. "If I thought you were unhappy," he said in savage passion, forgetting his self-control in the sight of the terrible delicacy of the beautiful face, for whose happiness he would have died, "I would——"

What would he do? His anger died away in a muttered exclamation as he acknowledged its impotence even to himself.

"No—you can do nothing. I have eaten the pomegranate seeds and there is no change for me for evermore. Do you remember warning me that night? It was too late then—everything came too late—even that paragraph in the paper. Oh! I know. It was you who had it put in for my sake. I found that out afterwards. Oh, why were you so good to me, when I was so weak and so wicked?"

The strain of the last two days told on her at last. The breaking down of his calm being the last touch her overstrung nerves could bear. She did not even know what her words were betraying.

They stood looking at each other over the bed of narcissus-flowers.

Perhaps she read in his eyes what she had betrayed, for she buried her face in her hands with a bitter crying. He looked at her as a man looks on the face of the dead. And there was that in his eyes which can only be there once in a man's lifetime, lest his heart should break outright.

"There is one thing I would like to say," he said at last, in a hoarse, strained voice. "It is not much; but it is due to you—and myself. I did not know this—or I would have died rather than have

come to Oaklands. I thought if there were pain—it would be only for me. I did have that paragraph put in the paper, and I came to see that it had made your life happier. Now there is nothing I can do to mend the mistake?"

"Yes," she said, looking up with eyes so full of tears and shame that he could not meet them; "you can do one thing. You can go away and never see my face again."

And so Cecil Linton turned away and left her standing alone among the narcissus-flowers. But he could never think of her again as Persephone. To him she was the Lady of Dis for evermore.

HEART OF FEATHER—HEART OF LEAD.

CHAPTER I.—HEART OF FEATHER.

"A PICNIC is of all weary forms of entertainment the weariest."

"Why come to it then?"

"Want of resolution to refuse, in the first instance; and in the second, a premonition that you would be here."

"But you didn't know me, Mr. Cuthbert."

"But my garrulously-given cousin, Mrs. Langham, has had that privilege for about a month I believe, and during that month I have been her constant guest, and you have been her constant theme."

"I'm very sorry that her mention of me should have led you into the error of coming here to-day as you don't like it."

"Pardon me, Miss Rashleigh, I like it extremely. I am surrounded by most of the comforts and many of the luxuries for which my readily-satisfied soul craves, namely, fresh air, lobster salad, sunshine, beautiful women, beautiful scenery, and—need I go on with my list, or are you satisfied with my reasons for my being happy though here?"

"Quite satisfied. I don't want to trouble you to utter another word."

"In fact I don't amuse you?"

"You do not; but why should you? If you amuse yourself, you fulfil the one great aim and object of man."

"Of the majority of men I grant. I am the amiable exception to the selfish rule; my chief aim and object, for so long as we both do picnic together, will be to amuse you. Do you think that anyone will attempt to interfere with my praiseworthy ambition?"

The words were frivolous enough; but the man who uttered them looked anxious, and the girl to whom they were addressed looked uneasy.

"There is no one to interfere between me and anybody—who should there be?" she was asking more earnestly than the circumstances seemed to warrant. But the ready answer that was rising to Cuthbert's lips was interrupted by a disturbed movement among those assembled rather nearer to the well-covered table-cloth than this pair, and by a general cry of "Mr. Dunstan," and a special exclamation from the hostess, Mrs. Langham, of

"So glad you're come, Mr. Dunstan. Daisy said there was no chance of your getting out to us."

The new comer was a short, thick-set man of about twenty-five or six. A man whose otherwise plain face was rendered interesting always, fascinating often, by its vigorous and refined intellectuality and brilliant animation. That he was a favourite, and of a certain importance in this circle, into which he had come abruptly and unexpectedly, was evident. Nevertheless, a disappointed, discontented expression flashed across his face as he turned from the greetings the others were offering him, and glanced in the direction of the little group of two whose conversation has just been recorded. Simultaneously with his glance in their direction, the man whom Daisy Rashleigh had addressed as Mr. Cuthbert was muttering:

"You are answered! You ask, 'Who is there to interfere between you and anybody,' and the voice of the assembled multitude replies, 'Mr. Dunstan.' See, he's coming to claim his own, and put me in my proper place somewhere out in the cold."

He spoke lightly, almost mockingly; but there was a look of pensive pain and chagrin in his eyes. A warmer tone of colour overspread Daisy's pretty face, a softer, sweeter light came into her golden hazel eyes, and her delicately-moulded lips parted tremulously in a manner that was perniciously gratifying to the vanity of the man who had called the emotion she betrayed into existence. But she raised her handsomely-poised little head defiantly, as she felt rather than saw Dunstan approaching them, and murmured softly:

"Supposing his claim is not acknowledged?"

"Don't tempt me to dispute it, Miss Rashleigh, unless you are prepared to

reward the attempt," he was murmuring eagerly when Mr. Dunstan's decided and rather authoritative tones interrupted him.

"I have obeyed you, you see, Daisy; and now, as I've lost more than half-a-day's work to please you, you must come and show me the chief objects of interest in this part of the forest. The tree that made the arrow glance aside that slew a King is somewhere about here, isn't it?"

He spoke smilingly and brightly; but even Cuthbert, who saw him for the first time, clearly discerned the bitterness which was beneath the bright, kindly surface.

"I've looked at the tree, and failed to find the arrow already this morning," Daisy answered carelessly and coolly, "so I think you must excuse me if I decline to tramp off in the sun to do it again."

"You forget that you will be in the shade all the time, if you—when you walk there with me," Mr. Dunstan said gently. And, as he spoke, he held his hand out to the girl to help her to rise from the fallen trunk of a tree on which she sat, with Cuthbert stretched at her feet.

"And you forget that it's not a very polite thing which you are asking me to do," she said pettishly, turning her eyes from him with a look of aversion that was not lost either upon him or upon the man at her feet. "Mr. Cuthbert, let me introduce you to him." Cuthbert rose, and the two men raised their hats with a rather aggressive air on each side. "Mr. Cuthbert has been ministering to my many wants all through luncheon; and now, just as I was going to try and repay his kindness by doing a little sketch of that glade for him, you want to swoop me off."

It was the first mention made of the sketch, but Cuthbert's heart throbbed gratefully at this stroke of her inventive genius.

"You told me you were coming here to-day to forget everything connected with your calling; and when I suggested that a few sketches of the New Forest trees would be of use to you, you said you 'wouldn't be so shabby as to lug a sketch-book to a picnic.' I quote your own words."

"I detest having my weak words of the morning dished up for my discomfiture in the afternoon. Mr. Cuthbert, you shall not carry away the impression that I'm a mere feather-headed person; and that is the impression you would have of me if I cast my resolution of making a sketch of that glade for you

to the winds. Mrs. Langham will go with you to look at Rufus's tree," she added, turning to Mr. Dunstan; "you're such a favourite of hers that I believe she would walk from one end of the forest to the other with you."

Mr. Dunstan's eyes sparkled hopefully. Was Daisy a little jealous, perhaps, of the woman with whom he was openly such a favourite? If such was the case it would account, in the most satisfactory way, for the unbecomingly pronounced way in which she was deporting herself with this long-legged, cynical-looking, unknown fellow. The possibility of its being so, softened a certain asperity which was beginning to creep into his manner, and threw him off his suspicious guard for a short time. But still he did not feel inclined to go and verify Daisy's statement as to Mrs. Langham's readiness to accompany him to Rufus's oak. While Cuthbert maintained his proximity to Daisy, Daisy's betrothed feared his fate too much to leave her.

Meanwhile some of those who had finished luncheon, the scenery, and the best bits of scandal of the day, began to find monotony prevailing, and so turned to the discussion of Daisy Rashleigh's imprudence.

This was a well-worn theme with the majority of her friends and acquaintances of the gentler sex. Popular as she was in the society in which she moved, there was an independence that sometimes savoured of recklessness about this girl of twenty that provided many a succulent tit-bit of doubting conjecture, many an appetising little dread of what would be the consequences of her imprudence, for the consumption of the friendly clique. In short, popular as she was, Daisy Rashleigh had the art of attracting more condemnatory attention from her relations and friends than is bestowed upon the majority of well-meaning or even of ill-meaning girls.

Twenty years ago there were not so many young lady artists in London as there are in this present year of grace. Daisy Rashleigh was among the first of those who owned a studio and a reputation all her own, and the pretty young pioneer had a period of glittering happiness, the mere memory of which helped her through many a sad-coloured year in the future. She had been engaged to Mr. Dunstan about six months, when she went to the picnic in the New Forest, and met a man who, with a few quickly-given looks, a few

abruptly-spoken words, shook the false god she had tried to worship on his pedestal, and made her long to be free to win and to be won by this Edward Cuthbert, of whom she had never heard two hours before.

The longing was upon her as she sat on the fallen trunk of the tree, midway between the two men who stood on either side of her. And, as her friends at a short distance marked the situation, some of the following remarks showed their keen appreciation of it.

"Daisy Rashleigh wants a word of friendly advice, why don't you give it to her, Mrs. Langham? She has been making herself ridiculously conspicuous with that Mr. Cuthbert all the day, and now Mr. Dunstan has come, and there's an awkwardness."

"Daisy Rashleigh is worlds too nice to throw herself away on a fellow like Dunstan, who knows how to deal with a dead language better than with a living girl."

"Pardon me," interposed Mrs. Langham. "I think, myself, that when a girl is engaged to a man of whom she may well be proud, she should behave herself as such."

"Why should Miss Rashleigh be proud of being engaged to that little man, Mrs. Langham?"

"How can you ask, my dear Miss Desmond? He has a European reputation, besides being one of the best men that ever lived. If I had a daughter old enough for him I should grudge him as a son-in-law to Mrs. Rashleigh," Mrs. Langham said warmly.

"It seems to me—I know very little of them, only what I have seen to-day, you know—that Mr. Cuthbert interests that pretty girl much more than the man with the European reputation will ever have the power to do. And I don't wonder at it," she continued decidedly.

"It's to be hoped that you won't get intimate enough with Daisy Rashleigh to implant any of those sentiments in her mind," Mr. Dunstan's firm ally and advocate, Mrs. Langham, said severely.

"Don't be afraid for her," the girl laughed. "I never do works of supererogation; the sentiments are there, and of a flourishing growth already. See! she has held her own against his irritatingly clumsy importunities, and is staying there with Mr. Cuthbert, in spite of her affianced's ungainly efforts to assist her to rise from her seat. What is Mr. Dunstan, that he

is so curiously devoid of everything approaching manliness in manner and appearance?"

"A man whose fame will last as long as English literature itself," Mrs. Langham explained, and then someone else joined in with the laughing remark:

"I've heard that Dunstan pleases himself with the gentle fancy that Daisy has succumbed to his manly prowess and personal appearance irrespective of his literary attainments and reputation altogether. He told me the other day that Miss Rashleigh regarded the six-foot, stalwart type of Englishman with positive aversion? Looks like it just now, doesn't it?"

The others glanced in the direction of the discussed two as the last speaker finished, and saw that Mr. Dunstan was coming towards them rapidly with a jauntiness of step and manner that was belied by the mortified expression on his clear tell-tale face. With all the man's cleverness; and for all his sensitive vanity and self-consciousness, he did honestly and deeply love the girl who was now openly preferring another man to himself. He could not help loving her, any more than he could help seeing that she was lapsing from him. And so love and fear worked their worst in him, and made him act foolishly.

"I shall take Daisy home in about half an hour," he began with feigned hilarity to Mrs. Langham. "I have an appointment with two or three of the staff about five, and Mrs. Rashleigh will be distressed if I leave Daisy here by herself."

"She would be with us, she wouldn't be by herself," Mrs. Langham remonstrated, fearing, reasonably enough, that any ill-advised attempt on his part to exert authority over Daisy, might result in the girl's defying it at once.

He looked uneasily at the pair, who were by this time bending over the sketch at which Daisy was working with steady, skilful fingers; and as he looked his brow darkened.

"Daisy is too unguarded in her manner for it to be well for her to be thrown upon the companionship of miscellaneous men. She is too apt to treat all men as gentlemen."

"My cousin, Mr. Cuthbert, is one," Mrs. Langham interposed, blushing and angry in spite of herself.

"Your cousin, is he? Well, I have no doubt he is a most admirable young man, but still he is hardly the man I like to see

monopolising Daisy. Will you tell her that her mother wishes her to go back with me by the next train?"

"You had better leave her with me. Really you had better trust her!" Mrs. Langham whispered in earnest entreaty; but his jealousy and longing to show his power over the girl were all in arms, and Mrs. Langham's counsel was disregarded.

"I would leave her willingly, but I cannot disregard her mother's wishes," he said with an air of frank sincerity and indifference, that failed to deceive anyone, and that contrasted funnily with the sharp, quick, distrustful glances he gave surreptitiously to Daisy and her companion. At that moment Cuthbert was saying:

"Your name was the first my eyes lighted on when I opened the Royal Academy catalogue, and your picture was the one I made for the minute I got into the room. That was before I had ever heard you spoken of, remember. So we must regard it as a direct interposition of the finger of Fate."

"Did that same finger indicate me, as I stood a few yards off, hoping to hear someone say a good word for my first exhibit?"

"No; you couldn't have been there on the occasion. I should have recognised you as the artist at once, and should have introduced myself, and——" He paused, and she asked:

"And what then?"

"I should have gained all the weeks that have intervened between that first of May and this tenth of August, instead of having all my work before me."

"What is your work, Mr. Cuthbert?"

"A labour I shall delight in—still I don't think that it will physic the pain I shall feel if it fails to be rewarded."

"Is the labour legal or literary? Someone told me you were a barrister, who did nothing but write for magazines, and someone else said you were a magazinist who did nothing but suppress all impatience for briefs; which is true?"

"The labour to which I purpose devoting myself is of a more exciting nature than either law or literature."

"Can you tell me anything about it?"

"I shall probably tell you a good deal about it."

"Then it won't be a secret."

"Not from you."

"Is it—commercial—perhaps?" she suggested, half timidly looking up into the face that was half flushed with colour and quivering with emotion like a girl's.

"It's a venture on which I shall stake

all I prize most. If I win I shall be an awfully lucky fellow, and if I lose——" he checked himself, and she impulsively put her hand on his arm.

"And if you lose, what then? Do tell me."

"I shall be considerably worse off than I was when I saw you first this morning."

"Poor fellow!" she said softly; "though I don't know why I say, poor fellow! for you may be very well off already, only somehow I don't like to think of your failing in ever so small a thing. I should like you to succeed."

"If you wish me to succeed I shall."

"Then with all my heart I wish you success," she said heartily, putting the pencil into her left hand and giving him her right one fearlessly.

"Daisy, Daisy!" he murmured daringly, "I have heard that your memory is bad for the promises you give in thoughtless kindness; and I've heard something that's harder still—that you're engaged. Is it so?"

"Is which so? And why do you care?"

"Are you capricious, and are you engaged?"

"A little."

"Do you mean a little capricious or a little engaged?"

"A little of both. Here, take the sketch, it's vilely done, but it will help to remind you of the day you came to the resolution that you would really labour, and—of me."

"If it pleases you to think that I shall never forget you, that, let what will come, you'll be the sweetest memory of my life, take that assurance at once."

She threw her head up and looked at him, her eyes sparkled, and then softened dangerously, flatteringly, and her breath came quickly.

"And I feel that it's worth having lived only to hear you say that," she said desperately, and then she added, "to think that all this—this, which will alter my whole life, should have come about at a picnic, where we met as strangers an hour or two ago."

"How soon may I see you again?"

She shook her head despairingly, and he saw that Mr. Dunstan was advancing, accompanied by Mrs. Langham.

"Your mother has commissioned Mr. Dunstan to take you home by an earlier train than the one we have arranged to go by; so, as I dare not disregard her wishes, we must say good-bye to you, Daisy," Mrs. Langham began, and Mr. Dunstan added:

"If you had not insisted on my coming here to find you, you would have had a few more hours' liberty. As it is, I am afraid we shall have to drive fast, in order to catch the train."

"I am coming, as my mother wishes it," she said without raising her head, and going on, added a few touches to the sketch. Then at the bottom of it she rapidly scrawled her initials and address, and gave it to Cuthbert.

"Let us see your sketch, Daisy," the authorized lover asked uneasily.

But Cuthbert had put it in his pocket and turned away, and was now apparently oblivious of all things, save the lighting of a cigarette. Nevertheless, as Daisy passed him presently, when Mr. Dunstan was fussily hurrying her away, the girl heard him breathe the one word, "Tomorrow," and, as their eyes met, hers looked assent.

The recollection of that word, and of the way in which it had been breathed, supported Daisy considerably during the tedious run up by rail to town.

As the train shot out from the station, Daisy had turned her face to the window, in a way that implied that silence would claim her for its own if her inclinations were studied. The excitement which had possessed her during her brief intercourse with Cuthbert had given place to depression and vague disappointment. She had allowed herself to fancy; she had almost permitted herself to hope; that something definite would transpire before she parted with Cuthbert this day, which would enable her to easily free herself from Mr. Dunstan. What she fancied might be, and what she hoped would be, was not very clearly outlined in her ill-regulated mind. Only she felt sure that Cuthbert could help her to be honest, and true, and brave enough to declare her independence, and confess to the man to whom she was pledged that her contract with him was an unceasing source of mortification to her. She felt sure that Cuthbert could do this, she felt equally sure Cuthbert wanted to do it. But Time had been unkind, and had cut short opportunity.

So now she felt greatly disappointed, and, as is the case generally with girls of her mental calibre, as soon as she felt the sting of disappointment she collapsed and felt despairing. As she shrank away from Mr. Dunstan, and gazed out of the railway-carriage window, she seemed to have eyes in the back of her head for his

unimpressive presence; and the conviction that his presence would probably overshadow her for the remainder of her life seemed to afflict her with an actual physical pain. It had been pleasant enough to flirt with him; it had gratified her vanity to see that she had the power to lead him on to love her to the best of his ability. At first, even, it had thrilled her agreeably to have it known that the sensible superior man of letters was ready to make himself very silly about her. But these soothing sensations had soon vanished, and Daisy Rashleigh felt wretched, remorseful, and terribly wasted.

Silence had reigned for an awkwardly long time between the affianced pair before Mr. Dunstan broke it. Then he spoke in a way that roused all that was rebellious in Daisy's nature.

"I wish that you would cease to make yourself ridiculous and conspicuous with every cad you meet in miscellaneous society."

She was too indignant to either parry this thrust or blunt the edge of it by receiving it on a shield of indifference. She fell into the error of retorting and trying to defend her action.

"Mr. Cuthbert is a barrister and a gentleman, and the miscellaneous society I met him in is a picnic got up by your friend, Mrs. Langham, who is his cousin. Besides, I didn't make myself either ridiculous or conspicuous with him."

"If your poor mother were more versed in the ways of the world than she is, I should request her to remonstrate with you," he went on, disregarding her disclaimer. "As it is I am compelled to take the unpleasant task upon myself, as I have no desire to see you fooled by that man Cuthbert, or laughed at by his friends, however ready you are to respond to idle and frivolous attentions from any man who offers them to pass away an idle hour, Daisy."

His tone was goadingly contemptuous in its affectation of tolerant superiority. Daisy hated him at that moment.

"You shall see whether his attentions are idle and frivolous, or not. If you find that they are, you may have the right to despise me," she said passionately. "As it is, till then keep your derogatory opinions about Mr. Cuthbert and me, and your remonstrances concerning my conduct with him, to yourself."

"I certainly shall not attempt to interfere with either again, until you have

learnt to distinguish mirage from reality, tinsel from gold," he said loftily.

And Daisy heaved an impatient sigh, and answered:

"So be it; only don't worry my mother about it. Let her think that we are—are——"

She hesitated in confusion, and he asked sarcastically:

"What are you good enough to wish her to think about us?"

"Don't let her think we have quarrelled, just yet, till I've had time to——"

"Bring Mr. Cuthbert to the point of proposing to you, I suppose you mean. Bah! he will amuse himself well enough without doing that. He's a mere shallow, common-place, male flirt, a poor specimen of a despicable genus! Forget him, Daisy, my darling; and forget that we have nearly quarrelled upon our different estimates of him."

The train was stopping as he spoke; there was confusion on the platform, and in Daisy's mind. Desperately did she dread the doleful hours of affectionate rebuke and expostulation which would surely come when her mother should hear that she (Daisy) had lightly lost the staunch but unprepossessing lover, and lightly won the frivolous but too-fascinating stranger. She could have parted with Mr. Dunstan on the spot for all time without compunction, had not the thought of the way in which her mother would vex her soul over the scandal of a broken engagement, restrained her. As it was, she sought for a reprieve in a cowardly way by saying:

"As you like; only don't stay and say anything this evening."

And as he had a special engagement with some men of "light and leading," he acceded to her cowardly little prayer for delay.

But before Daisy slept that night, Mrs. Rashleigh's seldom dormant fears for her daughter's fidelity and loyalty to an avowed lover, were aroused and in arms. And this though Daisy gave no expression to her wish to be off with an old and on with a new love. But straws show the direction of the stream; and it was significant enough, dangerously symptomatic enough to the mother, when Daisy said, in answer to her (Mrs. Rashleigh's) enquiries about the guests and their dresses:

"I can't remember what they all wore, or who they all were. Mrs. Langham's

cousin and I spent all the afternoon together, talking and sketching."

"Is she a nice girl? Will you ask her here?" Mrs. Rashleigh asked, beaming with delight at her child having made a new congenial girl friend.

"The cousin is a man, mother, a Mr. Cuthbert, and I liked him well enough to feel glad when he said he would call to-morrow."

"Oh, Daisy, Daisy! another idle flirtation! What will Mr. Dunstan feel? Why trifle with the affection of so good, so faithful a heart as his?"

"Let this—this friendship, liking, whatever it is, for Mr. Cuthbert quite alone, dear mother," Daisy pleaded with burning cheeks and swimming eyes. "I have been very silly very often, I know that. I have been a fool about Mr. Dunstan—it makes me shudder now to think that I ever might have married him! But this—this will be different. This will be real and lasting if you'll only let it alone."

A few reproaches, a string of tremulous surmises as to what people would say, if Daisy persisted in her fickle course, a tear or two dropped at the prospect of being deprived of a son-in-law, who consistently treated her with suave attention, and Mrs. Rashleigh's efforts to stem the current of events came to an end. She agreed to let "this" alone, and Daisy told herself that if it remained as it was, even without progressing one step, she would still be infinitely happy and contented; so fair, sympathetic, and perfect a thing did her lately-born friendship seem in her eyes.

But it grew! That it should do so was inevitable, for they met frequently, and Daisy went into the most blissful bondage of her life—a satisfied, fearless, engrossing love for Mr. Cuthbert, who was radiantly and complacently happy that it should be so. It did not occur to either of them that it was necessary that their relations with one another should be altered. The selfishness of the man and the unselfishness of the girl, caused them both to gather their roses while they could, without fear of consequences, and without reproaches from onlookers, who were rather amused than otherwise to see Daisy Rashleigh entangling her own feet in the same net which she had frequently of old time cast about the feet of others. For of all the coterie, Daisy was the only member who was ignorant of the fact that Mr. Cuthbert was only her slave, her knight,

her lover for so long a time as he could play at being these things with impunity.

Poor Daisy, giving her gold for dross, little recked that Nemesis was near at hand during that bright, blue-skied summer in which she lived her brief romance. Mr. Dunstan had gone abroad, more disgusted with her lack of appreciation of himself than solicitous as to her welfare, and the momentous question of the autumn outing was the vexed one in the minds of the majority.

And still Cuthbert and Daisy were all in all, and—nothing! to each other.

CHAPTER II.—HEART OF LEAD.

THEY met one evening—how vividly she remembered it through many long years!—at a little hastily got up dance at Mrs. Langham's house. Daisy had the impression, as she entered rather late, that many of those whom she knew regarded her curiously, and that Maud Desmond, with whom she had grown very intimate since that picnic day, had a strange expression of kindly pity in her eyes. But all speculation as to the curiosity or kindly pity vanished, as she caught sight of Cuthbert standing in a far off corner, from whence he did not emerge instantly as usual to meet her. She was standing between the curtains that draped the archway that led into the back drawing-room, pausing to speak to some utterly immaterial person only to give him the opportunity of coming to meet her. But this evening, though she felt his eyes light upon her for an instant, there was none of that glad recognition in them which was wont to thrill her, and a curious sensation of coming evil weighted her heart, as she presently saw him claim another partner and slip off into the little crowd of waltzers.

Those about her saw her face whiten for a few moments to the lips. Then by a strong effort she recovered herself. Colour, spirit, and vivacity came back in a rush, and the next minute she flew past him in the arms of a man who established a claim on her gratitude for ever, by claiming her opportunely for a dance.

As she passed Cuthbert she heard his partner say to him:

"That's Miss Rashleigh, Ned, the artist you know; isn't she pretty?"

The remainder of the girl's speech and his answer was lost to her, but she had heard enough to gather that the slim, graceful young girl with whom he was dancing was

intimate with him, and that she, Daisy, was being tacitly disowned!

As the last bars of the waltz were played, Daisy felt her feet lagging, and her head growing light. In swinging round she had come into collision with Cuthbert, and the tone in which he said "I beg your pardon, Miss Rashleigh," showed her that he was not only going to say "good-bye, sweetheart," but intended saying it in the coldest manner. The conviction struck her with numbing force, and she felt that her lips were quivering with mingled pain and weakness. Had Mr. Dunstan ever felt the same when he found that she was ebbing away from him? she wondered.

Had she been faint? She did not know; but she found herself in a chair in a little side room, with Maud Desmond by her side, and Mrs. Langham proffering all sorts of remedies. Maud's hand pressed her shoulder firmly, and helped to restore her composure, while Mrs. Langham fussed about her, speculating loudly as to what could have upset her so suddenly. And presently the kindly pressure strengthened her into steadiness as Mrs. Langham went on with badly-concealed agitation:

"I hope you will feel better and able to come back into the room soon, dear Daisy. An attack of this kind is apt to throw a damper over a party, and I particularly want everything to go off brightly to-night, as it's the first time Ned Cuthbert's fiancée, Miss Wilton, has been at my house. There, that's right, make an effort, and your spirits and colour will quickly come back again."

The words must have been prophetic! Daisy's colour and spirits came back with suggestive speed as the stimulating sentence was uttered. Smarting under the lash of it she rose up elastically, and was back in the room almost before Maud Desmond could whisper:

"Mr. Dunstan has arrived unexpectedly; don't treat him as a 'harbour of refuge,' Daisy! You'll be better drifting about in the open sea in a rudderless boat for a time than anchored for life in safe waters where you'll be very weary."

The words were kindly meant, the warning was a wise one. But Daisy was not in the mood to appreciate either kindness or wisdom. Thrown over by the man she had come to love in unconsidered haste, she panted to show him and others that she was not forlorn though forsaken.

"Don't you know that I have been

engaged to Mr. Dunstan all this time, Maud? Have I deceived you all about him as completely as Mr. Cuthbert has taken us in about Miss Wilton?"

Then she gave both her hands and a lovely, flattering smile to Dunstan, who came to meet her eagerly, with a curious questioning look in his eyes, that was happily banished by her greeting and smile.

"She's a hardened, heartless, feather-headed flirt, nothing more and nothing less," Cuthbert muttered grumpily to his cousin a few days after this in the course of a confidential chat; "for weeks, for months I may say, she has led me to think that her engagement to Dunstan had died out, and that she would marry me as soon as I was in a position to marry her. I can tell you, Helen, I had got awfully fond of the girl, and, flirt as every one declared her to be, I could have sworn that she really meant it with me. We were never actually engaged, because she said, in the early stage of our acquaintance, that she would never marry a man who couldn't keep a carriage and horses for her. I shall be able to do that soon, and I thought I'd wait till I could tell her so, for I believed all the time that she was going straight with me."

"And thinking that, you went and engaged yourself to Miss Wilton? You have small cause enough to complain of Daisy's faithlessness."

"The instinct of self-preservation is strong within me. I have been playing second fiddle to that prig Dunstan all the time, I understand—"

"From whom, Ned?"

"From some of his own friends, from one or two fellows who were rather glad, I fancy, to be able to tell me that Dunstan and Daisy Rashleigh had a perfectly clear understanding as to how far she might go with me."

"She has gone too far for her own happiness, poor girl," Mrs. Langham said pityingly; "you oughtn't to hear it, because it will flatter your vanity, and because besides you are engaged to Louisa Wilton now; but I'll tell you because I would rather you thought Daisy a fool than a knave in this affair. She's not one of the fainting sort, as you know, but the indefinable something there is about newly-engaged people must have struck her with painful force about Louisa and you the other night. She lost her feet in the room,

and her senses before Maud Desmond and I could get her clear of it. I oughtn't to have told you, for you will marry Miss Wilton, and she is going to marry Mr. Dunstan, after all, so be a good fellow, Ned, and forget all I've told you."

The one person who was made entirely happy by Daisy's marriage, which took place very soon after this, was Mrs. Rashleigh. To her it was the realisation of her brightest dream of peace and safety for Daisy that she should be taken into the sanctuary of Mr. Dunstan's steady, unwavering heart and comfortable, commonplace home. That there was something pathetic in the girl's passive acceptance of the fate she had accepted in despair when defrauded of the lot that had been glorified by her imagination into the position of the only one in the world that was bright for her, was an element in the event that entirely escaped Mrs. Rashleigh's observation. As entirely indeed as did another fact connected with the affair, namely that Mr. Dunstan, though he never referred by word of mouth to that brief madness, that summer romance of Daisy's, treated her from the first as a pardoned person, a penitent who would have to be rigorously looked after, and treated with irritatingly watchful care.

That the system worked well after a time may be assumed from the fact that Daisy, as her old compeers continued to call her, strove and succeeded more unceasingly and better in her art than she had done during her unfettered, unmarried days. But in spite of all her efforts to avert them, there came many a period of pinching poverty, when the literary labour, which her husband rejoiced in doing, went unremunerated very often by aught but glory, and the children who brought balm to her heart and anxiety to her mind, interfered with the painting which brought grist to the mill. Still, though such intervals as these recurred frequently, Mrs. Dunstan grew into the outward semblance of a very happy woman.

People who knew her superficially said it was impossible that Daisy could be a happy woman, fettered as she was by those ever-recurring sordid considerations about household bills, and the difficulties attendant on getting the best instruction in various branches of art for the daughters who had inherited her artistic tastes. But the few who knew her better understood that the frivolous girl had merged in middle age

into a woman capable of subjugating every merely selfish and personal aim and pleasure to the pleasure and well-being of her children.

From time to time, as the years went on, she heard of the brilliant successes achieved at the bar by that old unacknowledged lover of hers, of whom it was currently said that all he touched turned to gold. And she was woman enough, and generous enough, and perhaps it may be added romantic enough, to feel a throb of exultation at every fresh triumph he gained.

For his part, he forgot her in the intervals between seeing her pictures on the walls of various exhibitions and her name in their catalogues. When he thought of her at all it was with half contemptuous pity for the frivolous blunder she had made in not playing her cards better when he had been so infatuated about her. But as he was entirely well satisfied with his own wife, there were no regrets mingled with his pity.

But when twenty years had passed since the evening he had taken his premature revenge on Daisy for a fickleness she had not been guilty of, it seemed to them both that the law of compensation worked not inefficiently in her case.

It was private view day at the Royal Academy, and Cuthbert, a Q. C. now, stood, the centre of a group of famous men and fair women, before a picture that was exciting a good deal of attention.

A little boldly designed and splendidly executed oil-painting representing a group round the bedside of a sick child, on whose state the doctor has just pronounced a hope-inspiring verdict. In the face of the mother bending over this boy, looking up with joyful gratitude as the glad words of promise are spoken, Cuthbert recognised the face of the girl who had come into his life for a time at that picnic in the New Forest twenty years before, and he was turning to the catalogue to find the artist's name, when someone said to him:

"Miss Daisy Dunstan bids fair to beat her mother on her own ground. Surely you remember Daisy Rashleigh, don't you, Cuthbert? That is the work of her eldest daughter."

Almost simultaneously someone else was saying to Mrs. Dunstan:

"Do you see that tall distinguished man over there before Daisy's picture? That's Cuthbert, the celebrated Queen's Counsel;

makes millions, I believe, and has the most charming house in town. It's a pity he has no children to inherit his fortune."

ONE DAY'S WORK.

CHAPTER I.

I HAD been a shy, shrinking child when I was first sent from home, and I had grown up a not less shy, unpopular girl. It was not that I was ill-natured, or mean, or spiteful. I never remember any such charge being brought against me; nobody could say that I had ever done an ill turn to anybody, or refused, if opportunity offered, to do a good one. I do not know that they, any of them, positively disliked me; but as certainly there was no one who cared much about me. I made neither friends nor foes, and it was not that I did not choose to. I would have given anything for love; but I had not the way of winning it.

No doubt it was a gift wanting to me in the beginning, but circumstances had had their share in emphasising its absence. Had my mother lived until I was older, she, at least, might have learned to understand me; I say she might—I don't know that she would; I was not an attractive child even to her. She was so pretty and charming herself I must have been something of a puzzle and a disappointment to her, and then she had Godfrey—Godfrey, who was beautiful and a boy! It was not to be wondered at that, young and admired and in society as she was, she did not find much time for studying the character and winning the confidence of the poor, plain little girl, whose very coming into the world had brought disappointment with it. But as she grew older, I might have come to be more to her, had she lived. She did not live; at eight-and-twenty she died, leaving my father with the two of us—I eight years old, Godfrey two years younger. My father, out of whose life all the brightness and beauty had gone with her, induced an aunt of his own, an austere elderly woman, to come and keep house for him and look after his children. In my case, it was decided within the year that the best place for me would be school, and to school I accordingly went.

My aunt Benedicta had come to the conclusion that I was slow and sulky. The latter I may have appeared; the former I do not think I was ever taken to be from the first at St. Ronan's. I was

happier and more at home in my work than in anything else, and if I awoke any personal animosity amongst my school-fellows it was because I outstripped them in it, and therefore to a certain extent in the favour of my teachers. They approved of me, if they did not become attached to me, and one of them, in her quiet way, as undemonstrative as my own, must have done this, though I only found it out when I was leaving.

She had such a hard, formal, cut-and-dried manner, and seemed to go through her work so exactly as though she had been wound up to it, that I had never suspected her of caring for me or anybody. So when, the day before I left, she came up to me in the midst of my packing, and put her arms round me and kissed me, telling me with tears in her eyes how much she should miss me, how much pleasure she had taken in my progress, and how I had never given her any trouble, only the greatest satisfaction, I was touched and surprised past the telling.

"God bless you, Violet Damer," she said. "You are a good girl, and deserve to be a happy woman. And oh! my dear, don't let people think you less good and less loveable than you are. Don't let them be afraid of seeing into your heart. One may distrust oneself too much. One finds out the mistakes one has made oneself all one's life long too late to profit by it, but one may point out the rock to others and try to prevent them from splitting upon it just the same. They say you are cold and proud, and don't care whether you are liked or not, but I know better, and life gets very lonely as the years go on, without a little love. And it is so much easier to win it whilst one is young!" the poor soul added pathetically.

She was right in what she said, and I felt it and knew it, but how was I to alter my nature? It was good advice, but it was of no use to me; indeed, I should have been better without it, for it only increased my self-consciousness. To please one must feel in oneself the power of pleasing.

My aunt remained at Fernacres about a year after my return from school, to initiate me into those domestic duties which, by her own wish, were henceforth to devolve upon me. The place was more pretentious than the establishment, which had been cut down considerably at my mother's death, and my father cannot have lived up to his income, which exceeded four thousand a year. He was a man of

quiet tastes and habits, fond of a country life and quite happy—so it appeared to me—amongst his books and papers, when he was not out and about the place. That there was more in my father than—to use a homely expression—ever came out, the influence he wielded on the Bench, and the way in which his neighbours were given to turning to him in an emergency, bore witness. He was a very just man, and had the highest standard of honour of any one I ever knew, with one solitary exception. If he was also very proud, his pride was free from arrogance or vulgarity, for he had the simplest manners and was retiring to a fault.

The quiet, happy life that we led for the first two years after my aunt left us, seems like a dream to me now. I was everything to my father, and he to me. We never said it to each other that I remember, until the time came for it to be over; we were not demonstrative people, but so it was. We grew to be necessary to each other.

It was not a particularly sociable neighbourhood, to begin with; and my father had not been at the trouble of keeping people up, so that the claims of society did not interfere with us much. It was the greatest possible relief to my father, when he found that I shrank from anything like the ordinary routine of county society as much as he did himself. My first ball had been quite enough for me. I had been shy and silent with my chaperon, and still more shy and silent with the unfortunate young men who had been brought up to me, and I had been conscious of dancing in a manner which would have set Madame Michaud's teeth upon edge, had she been there to see it. And it had not made matters better that my aunt Benedicta had distinctly disapproved of everything I wore. Nothing Lady Lorimer could say on our way to the Assembly Rooms could do away with the conviction that I was foredoomed to failure, and before the evening was over I could detect even in her suave manner a suspicion of impatience and disappointment.

"I am afraid you don't care for dancing," she remarked at the close of it. "My girls doat on it. To sit out and enjoy yourself, you must be a great flirt or a great talker—the men won't be bored with you otherwise, no matter how pretty you may be. They will be amused; that is the fact."

"Then I shall never be any good at balls,"

I replied, with more alacrity than I had displayed throughout the evening, "for I shall never amuse them, it is not in me. I was the worst dancer at St. Ronan's, and I have not a notion of small-talk. I know nothing of politics, or plays, or fashionable people—how should I?"

My chaperon laughed and shrugged her shoulders, and Laura, sitting opposite us and apparently half asleep, lifted her long lashes, and regarded me with a sort of supercilious amusement.

"I don't think either politics or plays would be of much use to you," Lady Lorimer said. "There is a kind of freemasonry amongst young people, as a rule. You want to come amongst us more, and have companions of your own age. I must speak to Mr. Damer about it."

She did speak to Mr. Damer, and the result was a clear understanding between my father and myself upon this particular point. I was not required to go to any more balls, and I had *carte blanche* to choose my own friends, and have them at Fernacres as much as I liked, which was not much. I seemed to have no time for them; I rode with my father about the farm, or drove into Brentford shopping early in the day, and in the afternoon there was almost invariably something to be done, or studied, or seen to, together; and then after our *tête-à-tête* dinner, I used to play and sing with him by the hour together—for this was a thing I could do.

We had very little excitement. The one thing for which we looked forward from month to month was the arrival of the Indian mail, which never failed to bring us a letter from Godfrey, who had joined and gone out before my return from school. When I said I was everything to my father, I meant that it might be said to be so in our daily life. I was his friend and companion there, on the spot; Godfrey was the pride of his life. From the moment we heard that the regiment was ordered home, rather more than three years after it had quitted England, we thought and talked of nothing else.

It was late in the year—in November—and my father went to Southampton himself to meet his son. The journey from Fernacres was long and troublesome, and he arranged to break it in town, sleeping at Waterloo the night before the steamer was expected at the docks. It was the only sensible arrangement that could be made, though we neither of us liked—he

to leave me or I to be left—and when I had seen him off from the station I drove round by the rectory, and induced one of the girls there to return with me for the night.

I had arranged and rearranged everything in Godfrey's room over and over again, and as far as I could had set out everything about the house to the best advantage. It would be so delightful to hear Godfrey exclaim that he had seen no place like his old home during his years of absence, and to make him feel that nowhere else in the world could he be so happy!

I heard the carriage going down the back drive as I put the finishing touches to my toilette. I did not give much thought, as a rule, to my personal appearance, but I was glad that night that I was prettier than I had ever promised to be.

I remember stopping for a moment to look at my watch, and thinking that they had not allowed themselves quite as long as usual to get to the station, and congratulating myself upon the crispness and dryness of the roads. Twenty minutes to do it, and twenty to return, and say ten to get everything together—not quite an hour more for me to wait.

I filled up the time as best I could—read or work I could not—until I heard the sound of wheels once again, and then I rushed out into the hall, to find that the old housekeeper had quietly, as a matter of course, without saying anything to me, assembled the servants together to welcome the home-coming of the young master.

As the carriage stopped before it the door was thrown open, and I stood upon the threshold, my arms outstretched in welcome.

In welcome of whom?

One person, and one only, had stepped out of the carriage, and was coming up the steps towards me. Coming up slowly, and as it were reluctantly, not as Godfrey would have done, clearing them at a bound, in the lightness and eagerness of his heart; not with the well-known gait of my dear father, for it was neither the one nor the other, but a stranger to me, a man upon whose face I had never looked before.

My arms fell to my side, and I fell back a step or two, with a cry of surprise and dismay. I remembered it afterwards as the first greeting Arthur Vandeleur received in the house to which he was to be made afterwards only too welcome! As I uttered it, I felt myself drawn gently back into the light and warmth of the hall,

whilst the strange voice that belonged to the strange face bade me not be alarmed.

"I am here in your father's stead, Miss Damer. He is quite well, and sent his love to you; but he was unavoidably prevented leaving London to-night, and he entrusted me with a message for you, which he preferred sending by word of mouth to writing."

"But Godfrey!" I exclaimed. "Where is Godfrey?"

He hesitated for a moment, then he said quietly and firmly:

"It was about your brother Mr. Damer wished me to see you; but my errand is to you. I cannot deliver your father's message here."

I had forgotten the servants standing around us, forgotten everything, in fact, in the bewilderment of the moment; but now I led the way, with a sort of mechanical obedience, to the library. As he stood and faced me there in the full light, looking down into my eyes with a great pity in his own, I saw that he was in the prime of life, from five-and-thirty to forty—some ten years, I should suppose, my father's junior—and that he was singularly handsome.

"Tell me," I said, "for Heaven's sake, tell me! There must be something the matter, or you would not put me off like this. It is not kind of you—my father never meant you to torture me like this!"

"Heaven forbid that I should torture you!" he said; "but I am a bad hand at breaking bad news, and it is bad news; but you will do your best to take it quietly. I know you will, for your father's sake. He had a great shock when he went on board this morning. Your brother was taken ill on the way home—within three days of our arrival—very seriously ill, and Mr. Damer found him in great danger—danger of his life," he added with slow emphasis.

"I know," I said in a hard voice, "I know what it is you are trying to tell me. Godfrey is gone, he will never come home to us any more; and you have come to take me to my father."

And so indeed it was. The poor lad had fallen a prey to dysentery, and his father had just been in time to look into the dear eyes once more, before the light of life was quenched in them for ever. It was thus that before I was two-and-twenty my dear father and I were, as it were, left alone in the world together.

CHAPTER II.

A GREAT change came over my father, after the death of his son. His whole being was shaken to its foundations, and a restlessness most foreign to his disposition took possession of him. He could no longer fix his thoughts and concentrate his attention as he had been in the habit of doing, and it was painful to see how much the effort to do so cost him. He to whom so little in the way of society or amusement had been necessary for so long, who had sufficed to himself in so many ways, seemed now in need of constant distraction to stave off a depression which threatened to paralyse all his energies.

I could only do my best to make the void in his life less grievous than it would have been without me. But there were so many ways in which I could not take Godfrey's place. For one thing, the estates were entailed. I had never given a thought to it—how should I?—nor had my father himself, during the lad's lifetime. I never suspected how strong was his pride of family, and how his heart was bound up in those old acres of ours, until he found himself confronted with the possibility of their passing away from his own flesh and blood.

"To think that when I am dead and gone there will be no one left in the old place but strangers, no home for my child to return to, if ever she finds the world without cold to her! No one to hand down the old name and the old traditions! You will say it is all vanity and vexation of spirit, but it chills me to the heart to think of it."

It was not to me, but to Major Vandeleur, the speech was made; but I overheard it, and it gave me the clue to the chief source of my father's refusal to be comforted.

"Yes, I know it is hard," was all Vandeleur said.

He was staying with us at the time, having come home from India invalided, in the same vessel with poor Godfrey, to whom he had shown the devotion of an elder brother in the last days of his life. The passion of gratitude in my father's heart may be easily imagined, and it was enhanced by the prompt and gracious acceptance of an invitation, which had been proffered with natural misgiving as to its reception. We did indeed feel that it was adding obligation to obligation to come to a house desolated like ours.

He was a charming guest and companion, and did much to cheer us up. My father delighted in him, and we both felt an interest in him, which surpassed mere curiosity. We should have liked to know far more than he cared to tell about himself and his belongings. He was not a rich man; about that he made no sort of mystery, and he was alone in the world—far poorer than either of us, as he sometimes said, for we had each other, and he had nobody.

It was a dark day at Fernacres when he went away, and its master missed him in a manner which, had I been less uneasy, would have made me a little jealous. But people were beginning to talk about the way in which Mr. Damer's trouble was telling upon him, and I began to feel the responsibility that was laid upon me grow very heavy. He would not allow that he was ill, but he was losing flesh before my eyes, and he wandered about the place like a restless spirit. One of the persons who startled me by their comments upon his appearance, added to it a piece of practical advice:

"Why don't you induce him to shut the place up for a few months, and take you somewhere South—to the Riviera, for example?" said Lady Lorimer.

I did induce him to do as she suggested, and early in February we were comfortably established in one of the first hotels in Nice.

The beautiful climate, the complete change of life, the novelty and variety of everything around us, had the desired effect. My father, taken out of himself and roused to a certain animation, shook off in a great measure the depression which had fastened upon him. Little by little, he began to respond to such advances as were made to him, and made friends with some of the English colony, which had, even in those days, waxed considerable. Amongst them was a family of the name of Fraser, with whom lived, in the two-fold capacity of governess and companion, a certain Miss Dalrymple.

What can I say that will give any one, never having seen her, an approximate idea of the subtle, indefinable charm, that made Janet Dalrymple more attractive than many a beautiful woman? For she was not beautiful; though graceful she certainly was above most people. She could not otherwise have carried off her height so as to acquire an air of distinction from it, which she did. I don't know what there

was in the small, colourless face, with its aureole of reddish-auburn hair, its grey eyes and fair lashes, to challenge attention and not unfrequently admiration, unless it were a certain calmness of expression that characterised it. It was I think more in her voice, than in anything else about her, that the secret of her fascination lay. It was so soft and sweet, with a caressing tone in it, which seemed to take one into her heart and confidence at once. I admired her greatly, and admiration was not confined to me. My father, to whom there is no doubt the possibility of re-marrying and securing the estates in the direct line had suggested itself after the death of Godfrey, proposed to Miss Dalrymple, and was accepted by her, before we left Nice.

She received his addresses and conducted herself throughout with the greatest tact and delicacy. His wealth and the position to which it would be in his power to raise her seemed scarcely to affect her at all. That he should have loved her enough to single her out from amongst other women to share them, seemed to be the one thing she allowed herself to dwell upon. She told my father all about herself, which was not much. There had been a good home, and an ignorance as to ways and means, which was bliss whilst it lasted, as long as the Reverend Mr. Dalrymple lived. When he died, the slender provision that was left to his widow did no more than keep her from want, during the brief period for which she survived him, and then Janet and her sister had to shift for themselves. The latter had already been married two years when the Frasers first had the good fortune, as they deemed it, of meeting with Janet; and Mrs. Daintree and her husband were present at the wedding, which took place almost immediately upon our return to England.

The county was taken by surprise. People had thought it likely enough that my father would seek some such solution of the difficulty presented to him after a time; but they had not contemplated his making up his mind so quickly, nor, I think, were they altogether well pleased at his having gone so far in search of a wife. They greeted the new Mrs. Damer civilly enough; it would have been hard to snub her in any society, and, after all, she was an improvement upon me, if only in that she seemed less averse to society. She showed, indeed, a decided inclination for it, and her husband, disposed to indulge her in every way, put no obstacle in the way of her

entertaining and being entertained after a fashion long out of date at Fernacres. She appeared so perfectly happy and contented, that it was a pleasure to him only to feel that he had put her in the possession of so much enjoyment. But he could not shake off so completely the habits of a lifetime as to enter with any real zest into the more public part of her life. She and I went about a great deal without him; and though I would rather half my time have been with my father in his study, I comprehended that the time for all that was over for both of us. Janet made no pretence of caring for learning or lore of any sort; she had had too much teaching, she used to say laughing; but she never interfered with her husband's pursuit of it. Whatever he did was right, and it never occurred to him that, had she felt any real want of his companionship, she would have been more jealous of his books.

They had been man and wife little more than a year when my father's hopes were dashed by the birth of a daughter. His wife, too, was greatly disappointed, and nobody cared or troubled much about the baby but myself. To Janet, when once she was about again, it was more of a tie than a pleasure, and my father took little notice of it. To me it was a new nucleus of affection, and one I was in need of; for I had lost the first place in my father's heart, and I was slowly though surely becoming alienated from his wife.

One thing she had already done: she had made Fernacres as popular as it had been in my mother's lifetime. It was Mrs. Damer's pleasure to bring young people together; so she used to say with a pretty matronly air, and as the young people did not object, we generally had a house-full. I was amongst the objects of her solicitude in the beginning, but I was too impracticable for her, and she had given me up in despair, when, with Lady Lorimer's party from Claverton Manor, there chanced to come to one of our garden-parties a certain Gerald Guildford, barrister-at-law.

He was the life and soul of the entertainment that day, and of all the parties in the neighbourhood for many a day to come. Neither in his profession nor in anything else was he much in earnest in those days; he was overflowing with life and spirits, and as full of enjoyment as a child. Everybody laughed at him, and with him, and his handsome face was welcome wherever he went. Whether it was that my shyness and coldness

piqued him, and made him resolve to overcome it, or how it was, I know not; but whilst everybody else ran after him, with the perversity of human nature he ran after me.

But I would not have anything to say to him, and I told him so, until he set to work at his profession, and showed that there was something in him. If I were worth the working and waiting for, well and good. I let him speak to my father, because I would have no secret from him, but I would not call it myself, nor allow him to regard it, as an engagement binding upon either of us. I was very fond of him, but I had made up my mind that I must be more than very fond—that I must be proud of the man I married. So back went my lover to his chambers in town, to set his shoulder to the wheel in earnest, and I stayed on at home, happier in the prospect that lay before me than I would acknowledge even to myself.

CHAPTER III.

MAJOR VANDELEUR had not had occasion to return to India on the expiration of his sick leave, his regiment having been ordered home in the meantime; but my father had been married more than two years before his visit was repeated. He found a very different house to that which he had left, and he congratulated its master with great warmth upon the step he had taken. From the first his admiration of my stepmother was of the frankest description, and she on her side pronounced him delightful. He was at Fernacres more than a month, and went away more decidedly a friend of the family than ever. That was in the autumn, the third year after our return from Nice; in the following spring we heard with some surprise that he had carried out what we had thought would prove to be an idle threat of retiring from the service, and was coming for the benefit of sea air to Claverton, three miles from us.

"If it be sea air he wants, we can't give him that here," my father said when he read the letter; "but the house is open to him whenever he likes to come, and I shall write and tell him so."

"I don't think I would, if I were you," Janet said quickly. "You know best, of course; but there will be nobody else here just yet, and I should think it would be better if he were to come and go like anybody else in the neighbourhood."

"Just as you like, my dear. I thought he was too great a favourite to be in anybody's way, and Claverton always seems to me the end of the world; but no doubt you know what will be best for all of us," my father replied, with a surprise not untinted by annoyance. "If we don't ask him, the Lorimers will, ten to one, when they find him putting up at the Marine."

Janet made no answer. She looked pale and put out, and all that day she was unusually silent. I noticed it at the time, and wondered at it, but it was not until long after I understood the meaning of it, and gave her credit for at least one effort in the right direction.

The Major did not accept the Lorimer hospitality, if it was offered him; but he did come and go to Fernacres scarcely less constantly than a son of the house might have been expected to do. He was a good deal with my father, who was as fond of him as ever, and I, as well as my stepmother, saw enough of him to learn to take his frequent appearances as a matter of course. But I never thought of connecting them any more with Janet than with myself, until one evening I found her sitting in the boudoir from which he had issued only a few minutes previously, crying bitterly. What he had said to her so to move her, or indeed that it was anything that had been said, she would not acknowledge; but for the first time a feeling of distrust sprang up within me. I began to watch Janet—I do not mean in her comings and goings—but in her moods, and the watching did not make me happier. She was less sweet and even-tempered than she had been, and seemed to care less about anything. With the child she was strangely capricious, sometimes making so much of it, and after such a fashion as would have led one to suppose it neglected in her estimation by everybody else, sometimes and more frequently leaving it almost unnoticed for days together. Nor was she what she had been in her manner to my father—not that she was ever ungracious to anyone, much less to him; but the warmth seemed to have gone out of it, and I fancied he was aware of it, though he was possibly too proud to say anything.

In the meantime I was quite happy on my own account. Gerald's letters were full of belief in himself and devotion to me, and the course of true love seemed for once likely enough to run smooth. We had opportunities too of meeting, though Gerald's running down often to Claverton would not

have been compatible with the hard work I so inexorably demanded of him, and would, moreover, have given more publicity than I cared for to the relations between us. I always believed Major Vandeleur was in the secret, and so I suspect were a good many others, but I escaped little speeches and innuendoes as a pleasanter girl would not have done.

The summer came and went, and Major Vandeleur still stayed on at Claverton, only he had given up his rooms at the hotel and gone into lodgings. Things at Fernacres, if they got no worse, did not improve. Both master and mistress seemed out of spirits, and the little girl was not thriving. Early in the autumn she died, and nothing could have shown more plainly the gradual estrangement that had taken place between them than the way in which Janet, in whom the loss of the child had apparently awakened at last something like a motherly instinct, refused to be comforted by its father.

"You never cared for her," she cried passionately once—and there was enough truth in the shaft to send it home. She would have as little of my sympathy as of my father's, and it was by herself and at her own suggestion she went up to town in her first deep mourning, to stay with her sister. It was then—in her absence—I discovered with something like a shock—half disappointment, half surprise—how completely her husband's heart, in spite of the coldness of manner her own latterly had evoked, was bound up in her. What was it that seemed to prevent him from showing her half he felt for her when she came back? Was it that she seemed herself so chilled through, that the very touch of her lips froze the tender words upon his?

Major Vandeleur had been to and fro as usual during her absence; but he had begun to talk of going South for the winter, and I was glad of it.

Janet said little or nothing, and she had appeared to me of late to avoid the Major. The only one of the three of us who expressed any regret, when the time really came, was my father.

It was early in November when he took his departure, and about a fortnight later my father had occasion to go, on business connected with one of his farms thereabouts, to Cranford, a country town some twelve miles from us at Fernacres. He had spoken of the necessity of going some days previously; but it was not until the

day before we were told he had arranged for the Thursday, and I was struck by the startled look in Janet's face when it was mentioned. As usual, when he went upon any of these expeditions, he had his breakfast early by himself, and I, though I was down in time to see him off, waited for my stepmother. She was late in making her appearance, and when she did make it, she was in her walking dress and had her bonnet on. Which surprised and dismayed me most—the sight of the bonnet or the wan, worried expression of the face beneath it, I cannot say.

"What can be the matter?" I exclaimed. "Where are you going? You look like a ghost."

"So would you, I expect," she replied, "if you had slept as badly. But I have no time to think about myself. I have had a telegram from Kathleen. She is in a difficulty of some sort, and wants me to go up immediately."

"I am sorry," I said; "and just the very day when papa is not here to take you himself. I should be in your way, I suppose; or perhaps you would rather Brennan went with you anyhow?"

"I am not going to take Brennan," she returned curtly. "I am quite capable of taking care of myself; and as to your coming, my dear Violet, although it is very good of you to suggest it, I do not imagine they would thank me for taking anybody to the house if they are in trouble."

"But you cannot travel alone after dusk, and you will scarcely get back before," I ventured to suggest.

"I shall certainly not come back after," she retorted with a cold little laugh. "Matters will scarcely be so bad but that they can give me a bed."

That matters had not been at their best lately at Mr. Daintree's I knew well enough, my father having come to the rescue, and that not for the first time since his marriage; the puzzling part of it to my mind, and that I could not express, was of what possible use Janet could be, if the trouble really were of this nature, without the assistance of her husband. The brougham had been ordered, however, and was at the door before we had finished breakfast. I noticed, as she stepped into it, that she had taken the precaution of providing herself with a valise large enough to contain a change of things, and asked her once again what we were to do about sending to meet her. We were to wait for a telegram, she said. So she drove away

by herself, and I went back with a strange feeling of sudden desolation into the deserted house.

The door of the study was open, and I went listlessly in, as to the first place that offered. The table was strewn with books; but the desk, at which my father wrote his letters and transacted his business generally, was, as usual, a model of neatness. His morning's correspondence had been disposed of, according to his invariable custom, even when, as on the present occasion, it involved his rising an hour or so earlier than usual, and anything the post had brought had already found its way either into its appropriate pigeon-hole or into the waste-paper basket. One letter, nevertheless, lay there awaiting him—a letter from his wife.

My first impulse was to wonder why she had not left her message, whether written or verbal, for me to deliver to him; my second to wonder still more at the bulk of it, for it was quite a thick letter.

And then, suddenly, a dreadful fear took hold of me. Her disturbed appearance—the vagueness of what she had told me—her refusal to be accompanied—all rushed back upon my mind, and seemed to point the same way. She had so wearied of us that she had left us—and yet no! She could not—it was wicked of me to think it of her even for a moment—she could not have done this thing by my father!

How could I dare to entertain the thought of it? Why, it would break his heart, it would kill him! And I had been base enough to suppose that she, his wife, could be guilty of it!

And yet the mere sight of the letter seemed to sicken me. I went out of the room, away from it, and upstairs. In the corridors leading to the bedrooms I felt my skirts carrying something along with them, and stooped to pick it up. It was a piece of pink paper, crumpled up into a ball. At no other moment should I have given it a second thought; under no other circumstances should I have done what I did.

To begin with, I should not have taken it, with that sudden flash of conviction, for what it was—to go on with, I should not have considered it any business of mine to enquire into its contents. But as it was, I smoothed the paper out, and read what was written upon it. It was the telegram Janet had received that morning. It ran thus:

"From Arthur, Charing Cross, to Mrs. Damer, Fernacres, Redford.—Just received. Meeting at terminus inexpedient. Come direct to hotel, and await me there."

As I stood there, like one petrified, I was startled back into life, as it were, by the voice of Janet's maid, close behind me.

"If you please, Miss Damer, you are not to be frightened, for there is not much the matter; but the master met with a slight accident at the station. He slipped and fell getting into the carriage, and as they were bringing him home they met the brougham with Mrs. Damer in it going to the train, and she sent me word by Dr. Walters to come and tell you at once."

I did not stop to ask the woman where her mistress was or how; my first, for the moment my only thought was for my father, whom they had already carried into the study, and laid upon his own sofa. My relief at hearing the little low laugh, which was ever with him the surest sign of pleasure, was almost too much for me, and I fell back before he had so much as seen that I was there, laughing half hysterically myself. He neither saw nor heeded me; for the time being he had eyes and ears for one person only—the woman who was kneeling at his side, with a face on which the smiles and tears seemed to be succeeding each other in true April fashion.

"I tell you it is nothing," he said. "It is nothing but a sprain, Walters says so—don't you, doctor? And it is worth all the pain to be made so much of on the strength of it," he added, with the happiest ring in his voice I had heard there for I knew not how long.

And then he remembered me.

"Where's Violet?" he said. "Has anybody told Violet?"

And as he spoke, Janet rose to her feet and made way for me. Her lips were quivering, and there was an indescribable blending of pain and pleasure in the expression of her whole face. In that of mine there was something that frightened her. I could see it in her change of countenance, and in her sudden shrinking away from me. I was a bad hand at disguise of any sort, and the passion of pity for my father and indignation against her that possessed me at that moment, I could have found no words strong enough to express.

What he had said about himself the doctor, who had accompanied him home, corroborated. There was really nothing the matter that rest and quiet would not

set to rights. Janet and I might make ourselves quite easy. What little there was to be done would not take ten minutes, and the sprain would require no greater skill in its after treatment than the old valet, who had been with my father ever since I could remember, would be safe to bestow upon it.

So far so good, as far as the husband was concerned; but what of the wife?

What was I to do with Janet? What was it that had brought her back? If, as I suspected, she had simply yielded to the sheer terror of the moment, and the all but impossibility of leaving her husband under such circumstances, what guarantee was there of her permanent return to the duty she had been on the point of discarding? Who could say whether the tears, of which there had been so copious a shedding, were tears of genuine repentance, or merely the natural, involuntary outcome of mingled fear and excitement? One thing only was clear to my mind. At any cost and by what means soever, my father must be spared the sorrow and disgrace which had so nearly fallen upon him—spared so much as the knowledge of his narrow escape of them.

I cannot recall now the words in which I broke to her my knowledge of her plans. I know I showed her the telegram and the letter, which last I had possessed myself of whilst my father was yet lavishing his endearments upon the writer, and that I alternately coaxed and threatened, entreated and stormed, at her with a vehemence as surprising to myself, when I come to look back upon it, as it must have been to her. I don't think it was needed; I don't think that anything I may have said to her made any difference; I think my father had done for himself what I could never have done for him, and that she loathed and despised her own weakness more than I could loathe or despise it in her; but I did not wait to listen to her, until I had had my own say out.

"You are quite sure," she said then, "quite sure that you know his heart, and that he does love me, does want me, though I have brought him nothing but disappointment? It is not only the family pride you are thinking of, and the family name? It was not for his old name nor his broad acres I married him," she cried passionately, "but for himself! And then to think that he had but the one object, the one hope, in marrying me! Oh, Violet, it was too much for any woman to bear!"

Arthur Vandeleur had played only too skilfully and unscrupulously the part to which his infatuation had committed him. As first and favourite amongst my father's friends, it had seemed so natural that he should be made the confidante of his real feelings; and Janet herself, morbidly sensitive on the score of the one thing wanting in her married life, had been all too ready to listen and believe. Would it not be better for everybody, her husband included, that she should, by her own act, set him at liberty from a yoke which had become burdensome to him?

How completely the man must have dominated her before he brought her for one moment to regard things in this light, and how miserable a life she must have been leading for long past—it was terrible to think! To this day I am at a loss to understand the precise nature of his influence over her; that he had a passion for her there is no doubt—a passion, of which he was as much the slave as she was his—but the mysterious power, by which she was drawn towards him, seemed to have in it far more of fear than of love. It was not that. She loved him, she was fascinated by him, and she knew so well herself how it was with her, that her one wild appeal to me now was to keep him away from her.

"I never want to see him again," she cried, "never, never! But what am I to do? There is nothing he may not do in his rage and disappointment when he finds I have failed him. Oh, Violet, Violet!" she burst forth sobbing, "I am the most miserable woman in the world, and I might have been so happy! I was so happy, in spite of it all, when I saw my fears had misled me, and that your father was not lost—not lost either to life or to me. I forgot everything else in the joy of that; but now, when I come to think——"

"It is of no use thinking," I said harshly—almost cruelly—for I could not forgive her for the weakness which had been so near wrecking my father's life. "What has to be done is to act. Major Vandeleur expected to keep you waiting for him. He must not mind waiting for you instead. There is still time to catch the next train, and there is a long enough delay at Swindon to send a telegram thence, which will ensure his expecting you by it. But there is no time to be lost."

For a moment she stood and stared at

me, with an expression I shall never forget, in the horror and incredulity gathering on her face. Then she spoke quite calmly.

"Never!" she said. "Not if I am driven to take all my sorrow and my shame to my husband's feet, and lay them there, for him to spurn them and me, if so be he cannot find it in his heart to forgive me—not if you drive me to that!"

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IN THE MAY TIME.

CHAPTER I.

"A WOMAN with a history——"

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But Aunt Mary's story is not the one I am going now to tell. Bits of it may crop up here and there; but most of it she has got locked away where we cannot get at it. My story is only of me, baby May, the youngest child of the town's greatest man!

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Naturally, I thought my father the greatest man in Westbury. He was Dr. Freeling of Westbury, a small midland town; but twenty years ago I did not know much of the world, and the doings and folks of our county filled my actual horizon.

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I do not remember the spoiling, however. What I do remember was that I had a very good time of it generally, and "high jinks," as the boys and I called it, when those same boys were home for their holidays.

I could climb trees as well as they. I could fish and row as well as they. At cricket I was their match, for a girl is deft and quick of hand and eye and fleet of foot. Gradually, of course, time ended many of these delights; but I managed to fill their places with new ones.

I was nineteen. The boys were no longer boys. Hugh was at Aldershot, and Malcolm had just been made partner with my father. All the rest were married.

Hugh had a week's leave, and he and I were thoroughly enjoying ourselves.

Of course he was only a lieutenant as yet; but I specially remember one walk of ours. He had been telling me of his last love. Hugh's loves had been many, and I paid little real attention to this tale of his. I was in one of my wild fits, and my ears heard without my mind taking in one bit.

Hugh and I were up by the canal, which engineering of some fifty or more years back had carried along some upper ground. In fact, it rose so high above it, that our dear lazy river ran beneath it at one place, where, by engineering

skill that I never troubled my head about, the canal waters were carried by some dozen yards or so of aqueduct above the river waters. The point that struck this fact into my mind was the popular belief that, if ever this bridge should burst, Westbury would be swamped.

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It had been so on this May morning. Once again off the iron pathway and on terra firma, I turned round abruptly on Hugh and shouted to him to "hurry up."

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"If you want to know the truth," I said bluntly, "I am nothing but prosaic Mary, only Maries abound in our family, and I was born on May-day, so I am to be known as May Freeling—at your service." Here I made him a curtsy.

An amused look sprang into his eyes, and immediately afterwards a grave look.

"I am glad you see the gravity of the situation," I cried. I had no reason for what I said; in actual truth the words had no meaning, beyond the notion that they might somehow fit the sudden gravity of his face.

Again another rapid change came, and

"From Arthur, Charing Cross, to Mrs. Damer, Fernacres, Redford.—Just received. Meeting at terminus inexpedient. Come direct to hotel, and await me there."

As I stood there, like one petrified, I was startled back into life, as it were, by the voice of Janet's maid, close behind me.

"If you please, Miss Damer, you are not to be frightened, for there is not much the matter; but the master met with a slight accident at the station. He slipped and fell getting into the carriage, and as they were bringing him home they met the brougham with Mrs. Damer in it going to the train, and she sent me word by Dr. Walters to come and tell you at once."

I did not stop to ask the woman where her mistress was or how; my first, for the moment my only thought was for my father, whom they had already carried into the study, and laid upon his own sofa. My relief at hearing the little low laugh, which was ever with him the surest sign of pleasure, was almost too much for me, and I fell back before he had so much as seen that I was there, laughing half hysterically myself. He neither saw nor heeded me; for the time being he had eyes and ears for one person only—the woman who was kneeling at his side, with a face on which the smiles and tears seemed to be succeeding each other in true April fashion.

"I tell you it is nothing," he said. "It is nothing but a sprain, Walters says so—don't you, doctor? And it is worth all the pain to be made so much of on the strength of it," he added, with the happiest ring in his voice I had heard there for I knew not how long.

And then he remembered me.

"Where's Violet?" he said. "Has anybody told Violet?"

And as he spoke, Janet rose to her feet and made way for me. Her lips were quivering, and there was an indescribable blending of pain and pleasure in the expression of her whole face. In that of mine there was something that frightened her. I could see it in her change of countenance, and in her sudden shrinking away from me. I was a bad hand at disguise of any sort, and the passion of pity for my father and indignation against her that possessed me at that moment, I could have found no words strong enough to express.

What he had said about himself the doctor, who had accompanied him home, corroborated. There was really nothing the matter that rest and quiet would not

set to rights. Janet and I might make ourselves quite easy. What little there was to be done would not take ten minutes, and the sprain would require no greater skill in its after treatment than the old valet, who had been with my father ever since I could remember, would be safe to bestow upon it.

So far so good, as far as the husband was concerned; but what of the wife?

What was I to do with Janet? What was it that had brought her back? If, as I suspected, she had simply yielded to the sheer terror of the moment, and the all but impossibility of leaving her husband under such circumstances, what guarantee was there of her permanent return to the duty she had been on the point of discarding? Who could say whether the tears, of which there had been so copious a shedding, were tears of genuine repentance, or merely the natural, involuntary outcome of mingled fear and excitement? One thing only was clear to my mind. At any cost and by what means soever, my father must be spared the sorrow and disgrace which had so nearly fallen upon him—spared so much as the knowledge of his narrow escape of them.

I cannot recall now the words in which I broke to her my knowledge of her plans. I know I showed her the telegram and the letter, which last I had possessed myself of whilst my father was yet lavishing his endearments upon the writer, and that I alternately coaxed and threatened, entreated and stormed, at her with a vehemence as surprising to myself, when I come to look back upon it, as it must have been to her. I don't think it was needed; I don't think that anything I may have said to her made any difference; I think my father had done for himself what I could never have done for him, and that she loathed and despised her own weakness more than I could loathe or despise it in her; but I did not wait to listen to her, until I had had my own say out.

"You are quite sure," she said then, "quite sure that you know his heart, and that he does love me, does want me, though I have brought him nothing but disappointment? It is not only the family pride you are thinking of, and the family name? It was not for his old name nor his 'broad acres I married him,' she cried passionately, "but for himself! And then to think that he had but the one object, the one hope, in marrying me! Oh, Violet, it was too much for any woman to bear!"

Arthur Vandeleur had played only too skilfully and unscrupulously the part to which his infatuation had committed him. As first and favourite amongst my father's friends, it had seemed so natural that he should be made the confidante of his real feelings; and Janet herself, morbidly sensitive on the score of the one thing wanting in her married life, had been all too ready to listen and believe. Would it not be better for everybody, her husband included, that she should, by her own act, set him at liberty from a yoke which had become burdensome to him?

How completely the man must have dominated her before he brought her for one moment to regard things in this light, and how miserable a life she must have been leading for long past—it was terrible to think! To this day I am at a loss to understand the precise nature of his influence over her; that he had a passion for her there is no doubt—a passion, of which he was as much the slave as she was his—but the mysterious power, by which she was drawn towards him, seemed to have in it far more of fear than of love. It was not that. She loved him, she was fascinated by him, and she knew so well herself how it was with her, that her one wild appeal to me now was to keep him away from her.

"I never want to see him again," she cried, "never, never!" But what am I to do? There is nothing he may not do in his rage and disappointment when he finds I have failed him. Oh, Violet, Violet!" she burst forth sobbing, "I am the most miserable woman in the world, and I might have been so happy! I was so happy, in spite of it all, when I saw my fears had misled me, and that your father was not lost—not lost either to life or to me. I forgot everything else in the joy of that; but now, when I come to think——"

"It is of no use thinking," I said harshly—almost cruelly—for I could not forgive her for the weakness which had been so near wrecking my father's life. "What has to be done is to act. Major Vandeleur expected to keep you waiting for him. He must not mind waiting for you instead. There is still time to catch the next train, and there is a long enough delay at Swindon to send a telegram thence, which will ensure his expecting you by it. But there is no time to be lost."

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me, with an expression I shall never forget, in the horror and incredulity gathering on her face. Then she spoke quite calmly.

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IN THE MAY TIME.

CHAPTER I.

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from distressed seriousness he plunged into merriment, and met me on my own ground.

"Yes," he laughed, "it would be a situation of intense gravity—'Miss May Freeling, aged 90,' on your tombstone."

"Dear! I don't mean that! It is more likely to be 'May half-a-dozen things,' long before ninety comes!"

"Fickle woman!" and he tossed his dark head with a mimicry of sarcasm, and waved his branch of white May.

Hugh was striding a few paces ahead. "We want Shaw here," he put in grimly; "clack clack at both ends."

"Mystery?—there is a tale—tell it to me."

As Conolly talked in this way, he kept time to his short sentences by plucking the white bunches of May-flowers, and gathered them together in one hand, making them into a snowy ball.

"Yes," I said, "it is the mystery of the family. Beware how you play with it."

"I feel I must make this mystery my own—my very own!" Again he made a show over the empty words.

Empty words! A meaning suddenly made them full to overflowing, and my face at once was scarlet.

"What rubbish you two are talking!" said prosaic Hugh, turning round again, and waiting until we stood there abreast.

Was it likely my spirits should be so snubbed? Not at all! I covered my momentary discomposure by tossing my head wilfully, and by frowning upon Hugh in a mock-tragic manner. "Do not interfere with Mr. Conolly's and my conversation," I said. "He has scented the mystery of Westbury, and declares he will have it for his own——"

"Stop, May."

"For his own," I repeated. "And I am going to give it him."

"You must go your own way."

"I generally do," was my answer. "Clack, clack," were the words of the mystery."

"Yes!" Conolly's attention seemed gone from my story to the bunch of flowers he was trying to tie together with a bit of grass.

"Well, translate them, and you will find they mean 'swish, swish.' That, explained, will be found to mean the sound our ghost makes."

Conolly's eyes were laughing. "A real ghost?"

"Certainly. We'll go in at the back

gate and up the laurel walk, so I'll show you the hunting-grounds of our ghost, only—don't try to see her!"

"A she? Why not see her?"

"Because," and I screwed my mouth into a show of sad pensiveness, "I should be grieved to think I had spoiled your life!"

"You could not; you could only——"

"She's talking the most outrageous nonsense," Hugh began.

"Now, please be quiet. I am giving the legend exactly. The ghost, a departed Freeling of Charles's time, only comes to foretell evil to the people who see her. I wouldn't see her myself for the world!" Here an attack of superstitious fear came upon me, and by some strange bent of my nature I actually trembled and felt cold. I clasped my hands together quickly.

"We'll change the subject," Conolly said quickly. "Have I not made a lovely snowball?"

"Yes."

"It is for you. Will you not have it?"

"Oh! no, no!" I shuddered and drew away.

Conolly looked at Hugh and then at me.

Again the hot colour surged over my face. "Don't you know," I cried, "that if you give May you give bad luck? And if you carry it into a house you carry evil fortune into that house, don't you know?"

"Then here goes!" and he lifted his arm to fling the thing into the water.

Again a new humour seized me, and I felt I could not so hurt a man who was simply showing me a kindness. "Let me smell it," I said, "first."

"No." How firmly he said it!

"I will! You are angry with me!" and with a spring I caught his uplifted hand, and had the white snowy ball of May under my nose. What next freak would take me? Apparently no freak at all, for I quietly gave the thing back into his hands.

"Now you have given me bad luck." He shook his head and laughed. "Never mind, we'll throw it away; we'll command good luck."

CHAPTER II.

THE week of Hugh's leave was also a week of Mr. Conolly's visit. To put a large amount of domestic history into a small space it must be told that Hugh had made acquaintance with the Conollys in London, and that he had entirely lost his heart to

Nan Conolly. Hugh meant business this time, as we found out, and he meant that Conollys and Freelings should become friends.

It was the last day of his leave.

For some reason of my own I had taken myself off to the apple-orchard, rosy now with lovely blossom. I was standing under a tree that was literally a mass of pink flowers; a few yards from me was Silas Shaw, our old gardener, inspecting his various charges. I had not spoken to him yet, for my own affairs filled my mind, and I was simply acting out a wild piece of coquetry. Yes, it was as bad as that.

The week had been a week of marvels; but now the end was come all the marvels seemed quite natural things. Malcolm said that I "had been going it rather too strong!" And the words were applied to the manner in which I had treated Hugh's friend, Mr. Conolly.

He amused himself with me, why should I not amuse myself with him?

But, alack! alack! I was feeling horrid now to think that he was going away.

Now, putting various things together, and feeling really a sorrow in my heart, would such a wild girl as I look meek before him, and show a man that she—she—cared for him? That she wanted him by her side? That she would, the moment he had gone, fly up to her room and weep her first tears of real woe? Not I, indeed! May Freeling would never show any man any such weakness.

To be wild was the best antidote for any woeful feelings down in the depths of my heart; so presently, having faced my difficulty prosaically, I marched from under the shadow of my rosy tree, and made for Silas Shaw.

If I did not seek somebody, somebody would seek me, I knew. So I stayed out of doors.

I chatted with Silas, and at last I heard Hugh's voice calling: "May! May! Where are you?"

"Here she be, Muster Hugh!" Silas lifted his voice.

"Be quiet!" I commanded. "If they want me they can come for me."

"They!" the old man repeated, and actually winked.

"Is't another weddin', missie, eh? Weddin's be rare good days."

"One of your grandchildren going to be married? Is that it?" I pulled down a rosy bough, and, plucking off a cluster of bloom, stuck it in my belt.

"Law, Miss May! Five good codlins gone there. Now, don't do it, dearie!" He looked almost tearfully at my bunch of pink flowers. "Eh, I think it'll be a weddin'."

"Do you?" I laughed. "I don't. Yes, I do."

"Contrairy, Miss May? He's a smart young chap, doant'ee be that?"

"Nonsense! I'm talking of Hugh's wedding. Has Hugh told you nothing?"

"Muster Hugh 'ave said what he 'ave said. It's Muster Hugh's friend as I'm thinking of now—don't anger him, missie."

"As if I could!" I cried scornfully. "As if I should care even if I could! What is he to me?"

"Law, missie!"

"Just that!" was my empty boast, and I blew a leaf from between my fingers.

"Ah, there he is, and we'll have a good-bye all together!" I must have been mad, for I know I made a sort of dance as I ran from Silas to Mr. Conolly.

What was the matter? I could not explain his look.

(I know now that he had not come out with Hugh, but had really been within hearing of my idiotic parade of nonsense.)

"You look quite melancholy," I cried. Some feeling made me twist my fingers together, and lift my head gaily, and cry out these foolish words in hot haste.

"I confess I am not glad to go." He was throwing off that strange look.

Then I thought: "Oh, he cares nothing at all; he is quickly pushing off his interesting melancholy. I should be ridiculous if I looked grave over him."

The thought flashed through me, and my retort was the gayest of the gay: "How flattering! But we are so accustomed to hear the same thing. All our visitors weep on the door-step."

"Do they? I could not do that. Do you weep over them?" He talked gaily, but his eyes had a strange look in them.

"Oh, yes! We treat them all alike."

"Do you mean what you say, or are you playing?"

"Playing!" And I put wonder in my face.

There was a moment's silence.

All at once I saw my mistake. But could I go back? Could I confess? Could I sue to an undeclared lover for love? Say that there was one visitor who could make me forget all other visitors?

Some change passed over James Conolly. He spoke differently. He came forward

to Silas, and I think he talked now as much to Silas as to me.

"Were you in the laurel path just now?" This was to me. "I turned down there and followed some one who I thought was you."

"Eh, sir——" Silas began.

"Is your ghost a morning or an evening ghost?" Conolly was coolly careless. Then he turned back to me: "Were you playing me a farewell trick?—playing the ghost for—my misery?"

"I hate practical jokes!" was my answer. "No, I have been here since breakfast."

Had he really seen the ghost?

In a quarter of an hour after this Hugh and Conolly drove off, and I—I was in my own room, and crying my eyes out.

Woe would surely come to James Conolly through me. I should have stayed with him and Hugh after breakfast, and then we should have strolled out to the orchard together, and—and—things would have turned out differently.

CHAPTER III.

AFTER that, perhaps, I changed a little and became less wild. Anyhow, I fell for a few weeks into some foolish ailing condition, that was quite foreign to my robust nature. Aunt Mary, as usual, had the nursing of me, and I know I thought her hard-hearted over me—she ordered me, and she actually lectured me; then one day I saw what she had in her mind.

She thought I was pining for James Conolly.

Horrid! and my spirit flashed out in rebellion. I got well by sheer force of shame from that day.

She had said to me: "There are two to be thought of, May, dear; and men naturally repress certain feelings. If a girl wounds these feelings by her frivolity the man will suffer, but he will not show that he suffers."

I had taken up my wild manner as my best armour, and here cried: "You put it so clearly, Aunt Mary! You must give me chapter and verse!"

Then I was surprised. She did give me chapter and verse. In plain English she told me how in her youth she had been as wild as I, and that she had had a lover, but had trifled with him just one degree too long. She had been left alone, she had had to bear a great sorrow; he had gone away silent, and she knew that

till the end of time he would be silent to her. Through her he had grown bitter against women; through her he had plunged into a wild, reckless life; but—here Aunt Mary's grave face lightened—he had a nobility within him, and he had won strength at last to conquer vice and sin. Two years ago, only two years ago, when he had grown to be an old man, he had married—married the widow of the friend by whose help he had been saved from himself.

At the moment her face held me quiet; but in reality I rather scouted the prosaic dulness of her story's ending.

Such was not likely to be the fate of my love. No! Surely I could bring James Conolly back to me when I chose?

Only I must meet him.

And the summer came and went before I did meet him.

November came, and on the twenty-fifth Hugh was married to Nan Conolly.

Being Hugh's only single sister I had to act as bridesmaid; and it was James Conolly who was told off as my escort.

We were always in a crowd. In a London drawing-room who can find nooks such as one has in abundance in the country? Once I saw a chance for a quiet word, and—my tongue was tied.

After that moment it came that the bride and bridegroom drove off amid showers of rice and of satin shoes, and as the carriage rolled away I heard these words:

"After this great scene I might as well get over my small one."

Every one was turning inwards to the warm rooms, for, though the exigencies of a wedding are many, not one of them can make the air of a raw November day genial.

Conolly turned like the rest, and I turned with him.

"Are we, each of us, supposed to get up a scene because those two do?" I asked gaily.

"I think not," was the apparently careless answer. "My scene is not only small, but prosaic in the extreme. I am, you know, under orders to join at Portsmouth to-night."

"I don't know," was my involuntary cry. "Join? What do you mean?"

"There! was I not right in saying my scene would be prosaic? You have not even heard my news. Would a man going to his work be anything but prosaic when set in comparison with wedding sights and scenes?"

"And where may you be going to work?" I cried.

"In India. I have exchanged."

My heart fell.

"No, no; you have not? You are in the same regiment as Hugh."

"I was."

"Then I must speak. Why have you done that?" I cried. "Have—has any one behaved badly? Has there been some mistake? Has any one said just the very thing they ought to have left unsaid?"

This was a strange jumble, but I had no time to consider.

"Oh, no," and Conolly straightened himself proudly. "We all say and do ridiculous things now and again; and if by chance one stumbles on an unpleasant truth, it is none the less a truth."

He was so proud and cool that I could say no more. In hot shame I felt the fiery colour burn my face, but I managed to turn away, and when I turned back and faced him I was cool too.

"It must be the Westbury ghost," he went on, "that has upset the whilom order of my going. I think it was on the very day of my seeing her that I first decided to exchange for Indian service. I want money—one gets better pay out in India."

"Is that your reason?"

"Is it not a good one? There is my old mother, she will tell you the same!" And then over whatever had been expressed on his face before, I saw that a genial brightness took its place, and for his mother he would be her brave soldier.

Dear old lady! She was brave too. She said "Good-bye" to him after he had shaken hands all round; but, before his cab could have carried him out of the square where the Conollys lived, she was back amongst us, and only showed us the remains of some tears.

I shut up the book of my youth that day.

CHAPTER IV.

SUMMERS and winters came and went, and nephews and nieces were born, and on the whole the Freelings were a family who might fairly be considered prosperous.

The dear old father was, as I always said, the first man of Westbury; mother was gently becoming more fond of her easy-chair; Aunt Mary, perhaps in consequence, became a little more the useful aunt; and for me, I was the unmarried

daughter of the house, and I meant to remain so.

I, of course, had dropped my childish wildness, and I faced life. To be fearless and to have a kind of boyish bravery had been my nature, and happily that part of my nature stuck to me. I saw what I had done, and I saw also that my mad utterances on the day of Hugh's marriage had been the maddest folly of my life.

So I went through the time with the growing gravity of years, but not love-lorn. No; certainly I would never let the Westbury world say that of May Freeling.

I do not know what my charms were; surely I gave no heed to them, and whatever they were, they were natural ones. Something, however, must have kept me pleasant enough in the eyes of my world, for I still had lovers who would be slaves.

I sent them all away. Yes, sent them all away as soon as they showed the least tendency to pronounced love-making.

In course of time I was twenty-six—an old girl. So I considered myself.

Again May-day had come round, and the lovely white flowery drift swept the hedgerows. Again, too, I had strolled down to the river banks, this time with Ruth, Malcolm's little girl, so that we might carry home a bunch of golden marsh-marigolds. What a sweet, white angel the child looked in her snowy coat and hat, having her baby-arms full of the golden river beauties!

My birthdays have strangely been, more than once, the days of my fate. Before that May-day was over, a letter had come to me, out of which there grew how many events of the future! Nay, two letters came to the house, which in this case, made an important difference to the turn of affairs. My own letter I could have answered decisively, and no soul in the house be the wiser—was it not only another lover's effusion? But my father had one from Sir William Hibbert (the lover) at the same time, consequently the family had a say against my own private decision. Sir William was a man nearer fifty years of age than forty, he was the greatest landowner near our county town, he was a good man. That is enough.

They made me miserable.

I knew what I knew, but the reasons that I spoke did not satisfy any of my family.

They wearied me, and I grew in the next following weeks quite old! Aunt Mary's experience was as nothing in com-

parison to mine—I told her so. They had left her alone.

"Child," she said gravely, "it is not well for a woman to be alone. I think I could have been a good wife to a good man—perhaps romance fades."

One day my father made what he called his "last stroke for Sir William," I simply walked away from him and from his study in lofty dignity.

I went up to my room. This was no matter for tears, tears belonged to the olden time; but now my spirit was rampant, and I said simply to myself, "I do not care—they may as well cease talking. I will never marry to please them."

I walked to the window-seat, and, leaning sideways, spread my arms on the window-ledge and gazed idly over the old garden. There swept the laurel walk away from opposite the drawing-room to the lane which made a short cut to the meadows; right under me were the terrace, on to which the drawing-room opened, the side rockery with its great plumes of fern, the gray old steps and the two bulky stone vases. Silas Shaw was leisurely cleaning these out and preparing them for their adornment of scarlet geraniums.

My mind got over its anger, being, you see, so firmly settled, and I easily took an interest in watching the old man.

Presently I saw him take a newspaper from off the garden seat and read. Next, I saw him screw up his mouth and heard him whistle. Next he looked around and down and up. Then he whistled again and put the paper into his pocket.

Cool! It was our paper, not his!

I was a heedless girl again for a moment, and I called to him from my window.

"Silas!"

No answer, but the old man had suddenly cocked up one ear involuntarily—he was not as deaf as he seemed.

Twice more shouting "Silas!" brought him to look up again.

"Eh! missie—wer't you a shoutin'?"

"It was—is that 'The Times'?"

"Where, missie?"

"Sticking out of your pocket. Throw it up to me. I'll catch it."

"Eh, no, I'll bring it round when I've done this here vase."

Opposition always had roused answering opposition in me, and I ran downstairs and was by Silas's side in a trice. Why should he withhold that paper from me?

Presently I read down the "Births." Next the "Marriages"—ah!

"On April 3rd, at Bangalore, India, James Conolly to Ethel Stewart."

"Affectedly short." I really cried the words aloud.

Then the sound of my own voice struck me as strange, and I fumed with fire of jealousy. The next moment I was cold as ice. A great bitterness, and scorn, and rebellion, and haughty pride, all mingled together and made me act.

I never can quite remember the sort of scene I made of it—very likely I made no scene at all, but was simply cold and supremely dignified in my manner.

Anyhow, the act I achieved was to go down to my father's study and to signify my intention of accepting Sir William Hibbert.

In a month from that day I was Lady Hibbert, and I am sure no one had the vestige of an idea that I was not a serenely satisfied bride.

CHAPTER V.

WAS I satisfied?

Well—we will let that question wait a few years for its answer. Also we will let my brilliant bridal life slip into the past, the past that looks filmy and calm when ten years have aged it.

For the last three years Sir William and I, and Dorothy—Dorothy was our one little girl—had all been frequent travellers. For that time one and another attack of illness had made it necessary that Sir William should spend the winter in warmer air than could be found at "The Knoll." We began by going to Cornwall and then to Devonshire, the third winter found us at Nice, foreigners in a foreign land and yet having such tribes of English about us as to make us almost wonder whether at times we were out of England or in it. Stay, the sun said "no" to this fancy of mine, and Dorothy—nine-year-old Dorothy, was talking French like a little French girl—another very decided "no."

My husband was so much better, who could regret coming away from home? Nay, I was blessing every day the kind fates in the shape of remorseless doctors, who had forced us away from our land of fogs and mists.

All the world, however, was talking of going home—when Carnival comes one does talk so of "going home," because then I suppose there is a feeling that March will soon have blown himself away and boxes may be packed.

We had been out all three together; then

Sir William had gone back to the hotel—we were almost forgetting he was an invalid—because Dorothy had a secret purchase to make. It was her father's birthday, and with her own money she had made up her mind to buy him some "real English lilies." Of course every shop was shut, for was not all the world promenading, or racing, or chatting with friends out in the grand sunshine? Music was blaring forth from brass bands innumerable; chattering, and laughing, and shouting went on till the streets were a perfect Babel.

Dorothy would not go back empty-handed. No; she knew where the flower-sellers would be, or rather might be, and of course I let the child have her way.

She had run in under a low passage way, where a girl had flowers piled up for sale, and amongst them a big bowl of lilies-of-the-valley. As happy children do, Dorothy had told me "not to listen, and not to look," so I had obeyed, and with my back to her stood looking outward, thoroughly amused. Suddenly I saw a face—James Conolly's face!

If it were he, he did not recognise me; but, fool that I was, I made a quick, sharp cry. Alack! for my impulsiveness.

I could no more have helped doing this than I, standing there, could have stopped the life-blood coursing through my veins. The next instant our hands were locked together.

I think he talked; I do not know.

I did not. I was gazing—duty, honour, faith—all were lost in the old love! Then, suddenly, I seemed to hear these words:

"May Free! and yet not May Free!" Conolly spoke them as with a gasp and in a whisper.

The words recalled me to myself.

"No," I said, and I drew away my hand and fell into a proud stillness. "No—why should I remain May Free! We have oddly matched our lives—we each married in the same year."

"Married!—I? I never married!"

"Does 'The Times' condescend to a hoax of that sort?" My head rose in pride—happily it could do so, for sudden fear had stricken me.

"It would be a sorry joke." Conolly's face grew stern.

I read it: "James Conolly to Ethel Stewart." My lips and my throat were dry.

"At Bangalore?"—he tossed his head with a fiery, helpless gesture. "I was miles away among the Afghans when that mar-

riage took place—that James Conolly and I haunted each other for years."

"What?"—my gasp was scarcely a word.

"I got his letters, and he got mine—bah!" he turned on his heel. The instant after he had wheeled round and was facing me again with eyes that spoke what mine should never have dared to read. "Do you mean, May—do you mean that if—if you had not seen that you would have waited?" Again he caught my hand.

I could not speak. And before my tongue would move Dorothy came running out crying, "Look, mother darling, such a bunch, and all for my two francs! Will not father love them? Are—are you ill, mother?"

Still I could not speak.

And I helplessly stood while I heard Conolly telling the child something about his "frightening me, because he was an old friend I had not seen for a long time, and he had come upon me suddenly."

"Did you make her white like that?" she asked.

"I am afraid I did, May dear; do not be angry with me!" He actually pleaded with the child.

"I am not May," she said stoutly. "I am Dorothy. May is mother's name."

I collected my senses. I moved on, and I listened to the two talking.

I saw once and for all that Dorothy was my salvation. My own child had saved me!

From what?

Heaven only knows from what!

Was it possible my tongue could have spoken words I should have repented all my life?

Perhaps a man would preserve more self-control than a woman could do at such a scene as I had made. Whether this be so or not I can only say that Conolly could talk and did talk to Dorothy. Presently I heard this, and it struck common-sense into me:

"There is father watching for us on the balcony! He will wonder who you are."

Yes. But I could not have the two meet then. With a great effort I forced myself to say just this: "You will come to see us some time; come this evening." I put out my hand.

And just then a band in front of our hotel burst forth with a louder clang, and

a troop of merry maskers dashed past us. It was a new excitement for Dorothy, she danced for joy.

I told my husband all. Yes, all. Was I a coward, or could I be a false wife?

To my dear husband!—to William Hibbert! Never!

CHAPTER VI.

If this were the beginning of a sensational story, one can see very well how one could have drifted onwards and downwards; but it is not a sensational story, but only a plain telling of one's life.

As Aunt Mary once had told me, "romance could die."

Love as a passion, as a girlish frenzy, was quite done with; but love that had grown with years of companionship and of devotion, was in its place.

Time went on, and Conolly and Sir William were acquainted and friends. There was no fear of the old, dead story ever coming into troublous life again; and yet, when Conolly wrote one day to say he was off to Gibraltar, and that he could not run down to say good-bye, I felt a something like relief.

After that we lived our happy home life at The Knoll. The summer was a grand summer, for we had innumerable friends about us, and Dorothy had a perfect time of it with first one set of cousins coming and then another.

One day someone broached the subject of our next winter's sojourn. I think it was the doctor. I know it was on a scorching August day that the talk took place; also I know that I said:

"I vote for Nice again—do not you, dear! No place did you so much good."

"No—but don't you call me a perfect cure, doctor! I have a mind to stay at home, I am growing lazy." And Sir William made much of a yawn, as if he would ridicule his own weakness.

But I saw the moment after that there was no gay acting in the languid way in which he involuntarily leant back in his easy-chair, and the hands, which by habit fell on the arms of the chair, had never looked so transparent.

My heart fell.

"I can't allow that, Sir William; can't allow that," the doctor said fussily. "The hot weather makes us all limp as wet rags; but we'll not give in—not give in!" He himself was as spry and alert as any small wiry man could be.

The cooler weather came, but it brought no bracing, and we made no move for the winter because we could not.

Then, when the great trees about The Knoll were swaying under November winds, and when the woods were bare and brown and fluttering their last flags of scarlet and yellow leafage, Dorothy and I were alone.

Ah, me!

More than two years went by, and Dorothy was growing. I must make a change of some sort for her, and I must have a new governess for her. My little Dorothy must not be behind the rest of the world, her father's daughter must be an accomplished woman.

We were talking about it when the post brought me a letter, a letter from James Conolly in London.

"Might he come down?"

I said just that much of the letter's contents to Dorothy.

"Yes, mother, yes! And he will help us out of our difficulty. He will know somebody nice to come and teach me and make me as wise as—as—as you, mother!" Her arms were round my neck.

He came down, and we met him at the lodge and walked through the gardens with the radiant white spring light about us.

Chance—no, not chance, threw him alone with me. What can I say? Aunt Mary's dictum that "romance could die" was not true. Romance, my romance, would live for ever.

"But, Dorothy?" I murmured.

And at the moment Dorothy came springing to us with her hands full of flowers. "These are for your room, Major Conolly," she said. "I am going to run with them and arrange them for you."

"My room?—I am not going to stay."

"No?—yes you are. Mother, is he not?" The child's face fell.

"Not to-day, dear. Perhaps he will come another day." What would she say?

"That is not as good as to stay to-day!"

"It is to-day, or not at all!" How grave he was for such light talk! "Eh! Dorothy."

"No, no! I do not mean that. Ah! I see, you are smiling." Her face was radiant. "You will come soon and stay, stay for a long time! You will promise!" And with a quaint, wise grace, Dorothy freed one hand from her flowers and held it out for him to grasp. It was a compact. So he did come.

HYACINTH'S ATONEMENT.

CHAPTER I.

A WET November day; gusts of rain lashing the leafless trees, and little rivulets of water eddying along the curb-stones.

In the silent hall of a fashionable house in West London a woman stands motionless, looking out through the glass panel beside the door at the driving rain. She is dressed in black that has long degenerated from the stage of shabby gentility, and has become absolutely poor, and on the floor beside her a brown-paper parcel, which she evidently means to carry, is lying. A footman hovering in the distance is watching her suspiciously, and the woman knows this, and does not care. It is years since she felt conscious of having any susceptibilities to wound.

The footman has cleared his throat several times, with the idea of suggesting to her that since the storm is abating she had better go, but something in the silent upright figure deters him, and, reluctantly, he allows the minutes to pass.

Suddenly there is the sound of a soft step on the thickly-carpeted stair, and a tall, handsome woman descends.

"Has the rain detained you, Mrs. Erle?" she asks kindly; "it is clearing off a little, I think, but you had better come into the library and wait. There is a fire and a comfortable chair there, and you must feel tired."

"Thank you, you are very kind," the woman answered gratefully, "but I shall do very well here."

"Oh yes, very well here, but better there, come." There was a pleasant insistence in her voice, and something in the brightness of her smile that compelled the other who followed her, half reluctant, half gratified.

"And your parcel, I shall have that sent for you," Julia Ryder went on in her authoritative, kindly way. "Oh, but I shall!" silencing the other's protest. "Mrs. Sidney has so many servants, that it will be a charity to find them something to do."

"Mrs. Sidney may not like it."

"Oh yes, she will, when it is suggested to her. Mrs. Sidney is like many other women—merciless only through want of thought."

That was the beginning of Miss Ryder's acquaintance with Mrs. Erle, the woman

who came periodically to take home plain sewing from Mrs. Sidney's.

Miss Ryder was Mrs. Sidney's guest, a guest who snubbed and tyrannised over her hostess a good deal, as heiresses of independent character sometimes get into the way of doing.

With the general public the heiress passed for eccentric. Everyone knew she was wealthy, most people saw she was handsome, and a good many asserted that she held "strong views," than which surely nothing can be more damaging to a woman. At any rate she had lived unwed till she was now over eight-and-twenty, managed her maiden establishment very wisely, kept a duenna for form's sake, cultivated a number of amiable matrons as friends, and snubbed these when they needed it with a comfortable consciousness of superior mental power.

This was the lady who had been adding little final touches to a water-colour sketch, while Mrs. Sidney was discussing paper patterns with her sewing-woman.

Mrs. Sidney kept a maid who could alter fashionable garments for herself, but the maid limited herself to certain duties, and so Mrs. Sidney was in the habit of employing a sewing-woman for the children.

"She is so honest and industrious, and so deserving," Mrs. Sidney said, nestling down in the cosiest chair in her morning-room, and picking up her art needlework as the figure in shabby black quitted the room.

"That woman has seen better days," Miss Ryder answered with sharp brevity.

"So have I," Mrs. Sidney said, quoting Charles Lamb with a little shiver, as the rain lashed the window-pane.

"I mean she has a story!"

"Story; what woman of over thirty has not a story, I should like to know."

"But your sewing-woman is a lady."

Miss Ryder did not know this till she stated it; having done so she was convinced of it.

Mrs. Sidney dropped her needlework into her lap that she might laugh at her ease. It was years since she had learned what a girl to discover mares' nests dear Julia was, but this new fad about Mrs. Erle had the charm of absurdity added to its novelty. That poor jaded creature whom she had known for years, three or four years at least, as a perfectly reliable person who always carried her own parcels, and might be trusted with material in the piece—that a lady!

"Then you had better visit her and make her acquaintance. Possibly you might find her more entertaining than your old friends," Mrs. Sidney suggested with the merriest little laugh.

"If not she would be—dull," Miss Ryder answered, with grave, fine lady impertinence.

So that led to her following Mrs. Erle downstairs, and taking possession of her in her own way. Later in the afternoon she had out Mrs. Sidney's brougham, and drove to Bowdler's Rents, with the brown-paper parcel on the seat beside her.

"Thank you, no, I wish to go inside," she said, declining the deferential footman's services, "but you may carry the parcel up to the door for me."

Her first instinct had been not to permit this, but as George's face already expressed the utmost horror, she thought a touch more would do no harm.

Up the rickety staircase, past squalid children, with distressing sounds in her ears and distressing odours in her nostrils, the heiress piloted her way to the fourth floor, where her authoritative tap twice repeated brought the cautious question: "Who is there?"

"It is I—Miss Ryder. I have brought your parcel, Mrs. Erle."

The door opened quickly, and the sewing-woman, with a flush like two patches of flame on her haggard cheeks, stood on the threshold.

"I thought I should bring it myself. You may go, George," to the footman.

"Then perhaps you will come inside."

"Thank you."

The interior of the room was miserably poor—a floor of bare boards, patched here and there with newer wood, a deal table and a couple of chairs, a small bedstead in one corner, and a tiny wooden cupboard in the other, with a wash-tub beneath it. But on the window there was a snowy muslin blind, a linnet hung in a cheap cage near the light, and by the table, filling up outline prints from a box of colours, was the loveliest child Miss Ryder had ever seen.

"Oh, Mrs. Erle, what a cherub; is he yours?" the visitor cried enthusiastically.

"Yes, he's mine; six years old yesterday," with a touch of pride. "He had that paint-box for a birthday present."

"But he can paint. See, that is as well coloured as I could do it," pointing to the copy-book.

"Oh, I did that to show him how; but

Frankie will learn quickly, because mother likes to see him busy and happy," stroking the golden head as she spoke. The child caught her hand and pressed it against his cheek with a shy gesture of unutterable fondness.

"That woman has a story to break one's heart," the heiress said to herself as she drove back to Eaton Square.

A week later she returned home, and on the following day she paid her second visit to Bowdler's Rents. This time she took a picture book and a box of sweets for Frankie, and a bunch of asters and a china bowl to arrange them in for the mother.

She stayed half-an-hour that day, and, before she left, she had made Mrs. Erle promise that when she came again she should not disturb the routine of the sewing-woman's bread-winning. "You are to work just as if I were not here," she said, "otherwise I shall feel I am an intruder."

"I suppose her life is quite spoiled," the girl said to herself regretfully. She had spoiled her own life a good deal, and so was always wondering about other people's histories.

But she was not to discover Mrs. Erle's for many a day, and then only fragmentarily, as life stories are always told.

Once she brought Frankie a little suit of pretty blue cloth, which his mother looked at with sparkling eyes. "I should like it for him, and you are very kind," she said; "but he could not wear it. The boys in the court would ill-treat him, or perhaps steal it from him."

"Then you let him out alone?"

"I have to sometimes; he has just begun to go to school."

"Is that safe for him?"

"Not very; but I must be law-abiding. If I kept him at home I should very likely be summoned and fined. I wonder would the magistrate give me an easy or hard sentence," her eyes sparkling a little.

"Why?"

"Because one of the magistrates sitting, I believe, for this borough, is my father."

"Oh!" Miss Ryder felt a powerful shock; but she did not show it. "Then your father is a rich man?"

"Very rich; worth hundreds of thousands I believe; and I am his only child."

Miss Ryder sighed. She thought she understood, thought she saw here a sorrow beyond hope. "Then Heaven help you!" she said gently. "You must have suffered more than I knew."

It was a Sunday morning, six months

later, and May, lovely everywhere, was perhaps loveliest in London, when Miss Ryder, in one of her prettiest spring dresses, had her landau driven into Bowdler's Rents. "I have come for you and Frankie," she said, entering the little room with her free elastic step. "I think giving you a day in the country will be a better form of worship than going to church."

"How good you are; always so kind and thoughtful; but thank you, not to-day. If you will take Frankie it will be a great pleasure to him I know; but as for me, no, I could not."

"Is anything the matter?" laying her hands on the other's shoulders, and pressing her into a seat.

"Nothing more than usual. I dare say most of us have a day that is a painful anniversary. Mine is to-day, that is all."

"Will you tell me?"

"It is only that I show Frankie his father's portrait every Sunday morning. I can't teach him anything better than to tell him what his father was, and then when I remembered that to-day was the anniversary and looked at that," pointing to a miniature so minute that it had evidently been extracted from a locket, "I felt I had borne all I could bear."

"Frankie, dear, I want you to put on your hat and go down to that tall man standing on the footpath beside the carriage, and say to him that Miss Ryder says he is to take you for an hour's drive, and then come back for her. Now, remember, an hour's drive, and then come back for her."

Dismissing the delighted child to scramble carefully down the break-neck staircase, the girl returned to the mother.

Mrs. Erle sat by the table, her hands lying limply in her lap, her eyes fixed on the fireless grate. Julia Ryder drew another chair close to her, and took one of the chill, limp hands in hers. "Won't you trust me enough to tell me about it?" she said. "Was it to-day he died?"

"It was to-day, six years ago, that he went away," the woman answered in a hollow, toneless voice; "but I don't know if he is alive or dead. I don't know anything about him. He left me his watch and his three months' salary on the little table in our sitting-room, as if he thought that was what I cared most for, and then he dropped out of my life."

"How terrible!" Julia whispered huskily.

"Yes, terrible, is it not? His patient

face, my cruel words, and then a blank; and I have been able to bear it for days, and months, and years! Oh, I must be a heartless woman."

"God help you!" the girl said through her tears.

"He does help me, to expiate. Every day I live here, every menial service I perform for Frankie and myself, every meal from which I rise hungry, seems to me a part of the atonement. And sometimes I feel as if, when I have atoned enough, I shall be permitted to die. When you came here, and seemed to understand, I thought you had been sent as a protector for Frankie, and that my release could not be so very far off."

"If there was need I hope you know how to trust me; but your own father, do you owe him no duty? Surely he would be glad to help you."

"Yes, he would now. But can you not see that I could not bear it? But I must go back to the beginning so that you may understand. My father is Mr. Craig, a rich City man. I was his only child. In his way and as well as he knew how, he was very kind; but he spoiled me. I dare say I had good instincts; but I was selfish and autocratic, as only selfish girls can be."

"When I was nineteen a friend of my father's introduced me to society. I spent a season at her house, having no mother to chaperon me, and there I met Frank Erle. He was three-and-twenty then, the only son of a country gentleman, and a man of old and excellent family. We fell in love with each other with all our hearts, and Mrs. Gautorp, my hostess, approved. I have reason to believe that she informed father how matters were progressing, and that he approved too."

"If I had been living at home I dare say Frank would have spoken to father first; as it was he spoke to me, and I answered him with affection as hearty as his own. This was very shortly before he was summoned home to find unexpected disaster awaiting him there. Lead had been discovered on his father's estate, and an enterprising trickster had started a mine, made poor Mr. Erle director first and bankrupt afterwards, and then decamped with all the money he and other dupes had invested in shares."

"The shock broke the old man's heart; he died a month afterwards. The estate was sold to pay his debts, and Frank was left penniless."

"Of course Frank wrote and told me to

forget him, and of course I replied that I never would.

"He had been well educated, had taken a degree at Oxford, and now, instead of bewailing his misfortunes, he made the best use of what he possessed. He obtained a situation as classical and English master in a boys' school at Hackney, and from his lodgings in the neighbourhood he wrote to me again to forget him.

"But I would not. Was I not rich? Then what did his poverty matter?

"I wanted him to elope with me, and confess afterwards, but he would not. 'It would not be right, Hyacinth,' he said, and I began to learn that right mattered most of all to Frank Erle.

"He came and told my father everything, and my father showed him the door, and forbade me ever to speak to him, and that evening I ran away to him. It was all my doing, and he had not the strength of mind to resist me. He took me to Mrs. Gautorp's, and she, though strongly disapproving, received me, and three days later he married me from her house. I was twenty then, he four-and-twenty, that is eight years ago. You look surprised. You thought I was forty, did you not? No, I am only eight-and-twenty.

"We were married. In the great lottery I had drawn the grandest prize that ever fell into a woman's foolish possession, and I lost it, lost it, lost it!

"He loved me with the only kind of love that is worth possessing, but I did not realise what that meant then. He had only a salary of a hundred and fifty pounds a year, and I had nothing; but I wanted the pleasures I had been accustomed to, and when he could not give them I must have tortured him a hundred times with aimless fault-finding and foolish reproaches.

"To do myself justice, I thought my father would be sure to forgive us by-and-by, but Frank did not expect it, and he wished to be honest. He gave me all he could afford, he sold his watch-chain and the various little personal valuables that young men with money pick up, that I might now and then have a stall at the opera or a drive in the park. Oh, I wonder how I can bear to think of that and live!

"When baby was born I wrote to my father, and my letter came back unread. Then I sent Mrs. Gautorp to him, and he swore at Mrs. Gautorp, and at last I resolved to visit him myself.

"Well, he received me in his luxurious room, and was coldly polite to me, more polite than I had expected, for he had not always nice manners; but when I mentioned Frank, he said: 'Tell that blackguard, your husband, that I will forgive you when he is dead, never before.'

"Do you see how unjust it was? I, who had done all the wrong, who had forced myself on him, and who was now mean enough to come back to beg, I was to be forgiven; but he who was bearing his burden like a man, he was judged the culprit.

"I wonder what you will think of me when I tell you that I was vile enough to go back to him and repeat my father's cruel words. He was in quite good spirits that evening; he had been paid for his three months' work that day, and he meant to take baby and me for a drive next afternoon. Oh, it all comes back to me, burned into my brain as with a pen of fire.

"And how did I answer him, him to whom common things must have been more unbearable than to me, him with his fine descent and aristocratic traditions? I said I hated a stuffy cab, and I would not go for an outing to take my baby like a tradesman's wife.

"He took a turn or two up and down the room, and then he came back and tried to take my hand. 'Something has upset you to-day,' he said. 'Have I done anything?'

"Then I told him I had been to see my father; and when I saw the look of reproach gathering on his worn face, I got wild, and told him all father had said—that I was a fool, but he was a knave, and only his death would purchase forgiveness for me. He looked at me as if he was stunned. I am sure he could not understand that I could use such words unless I hated him. And then he said very gently: 'I am sorry I have made you so unhappy. I never thought that things could end this way.'

"Those were the last words I ever heard him utter. I was scathed with shame of myself. I was all wrong, and I knew it, but not being yet ready to confess, I rushed from the room. When I came back he had gone, and his watch and every farthing of his money lay on the table, and I was obliged to use those sovereigns to keep Frankie from starving, and that watch is in a pawnshop now, but I pay the interest for it regularly, and

when I am dead I want you to redeem it and lay it on my heart, and bury it with me; redeem it with the money I have earned myself, so that it may go with me into eternity as a sign of how I have wished to atone."

She had told her whole story in the hollow voice of one who has no tears to shed, but Julia Ryder was exhausted with weeping.

"You poor, poor darling!" the latter said through her tears.

"Don't pity me. I deserve no pity."

"Not deserve it because you did wrong? To me that makes the tragedy far more intense. If you had shown yourself in the past the good wife you are fitted to be now, the pain would have been bearable; as it is, I don't know how you have borne it. But do you know what I think? I think your husband is still alive."

"I thought that for a time, but he could not continue punishment for years and years. Oh no, he would have come back long ago."

"He is alive! where or how I don't know; but somewhere and somehow," Julia answered bravely; and as on a former occasion belief grew into conviction after utterance, so now she felt herself sure of what but a little time ago she had only fancied.

CHAPTER II.

"I SHALL go to Melbourne for a spree."

"And I shall knock about awhile, and look up some of my old chums."

"And I shall find some more work, and tackle to it. I don't see the good of loafing about and idling. What will you do, Miser?"

"I? I really don't know."

"Oh yes, you do, you old rascal; you'll count up your savings, go over your investments, collect the dividends, and invest again."

The man distinguished by the unflattering sobriquet of "Miser" smiled a slow, rather sorrowful smile, without answering.

The mining camp at Jebb's Creek was broken up. It had held together longer than many similar alliances perhaps, because the triumphantly auriferous days were over, and hard times had taught the rough fellows, drawn together from half-a-dozen different places and ways of life, not only patience but some mutual affection. For over three years these six had been living together, and now that their claim was worked out and the proceeds divided,

they had agreed to separate and look out for other modes of living.

They had been exaggeratedly cheerful all the day; more than once an unaccustomed throat had burst into a snatch of song, but somehow after a time the music fell into a minor key, and by-and-by stopped abruptly.

Now, as they sat by the fading fire, with soft moonlight through the open tent door illuminating dimly their bearded faces, any of them would have confessed that they would part with sorrowful hearts on the morrow.

But they did not confess it; instead, they talked of what they would do weeks and months and years thereafter, when they met again, and they strove to jest, calling each other by the friendly nicknames that to each man had grown more familiar than his own.

"I've half a mind to marry," one man said, with a resigned sigh. "When a fellow's nearing thirty he feels as if he would like to steady down a bit, and have somebody of his own to spend his savings on. I know a nice girl near Sydney, and I think if I married her, and settled down to farming——"

"Oh, farming, get along!" another interrupted with a laugh, "as if you could let your crops grow in peace for seeking nuggets at the roots. The girl may be all very well, but as to the farm, don't be a fool."

The aspiring Agricola sighed, but did not protest, and the other went on: "When the earth has given you gold from her very heart, to think of scratching her hide to plant crops on her is ungrateful—yes, ungrateful. No farming for me, thank you; but what I could see my way to laying my pile on is a store, where I'd sell tools and tucker—and whisky."

"And where you'd be your own best customer for the drink! Well, don't think of that, Joey, old man. It is bad enough to spree away your earnings at other folks' bars, but it 'ud be worse to have one o' your own. But seeing you've no capital worth talkin' of, I needn't fool myself down to your level with advice. Miser there could open a store, and stock it considerable, but I don't think he will—will you, Miser?"

"No, I should have no skill in trading."

"Though jolly good skill for finding safe investments. I think you're the only digger I ever knew to make a pile and keep it, and somehow we haven't despised

you for it," he said thoughtfully, "though I own we did not approve on it at first, and only kept to you because you brought us good luck."

"And for his goodness to Stubbs," another added. "He nursed Stubbs like the tenderest woman, and prayed with him like a parson, he did, and that would have made us value him if he'd been twice as saving, and"—turning suddenly and addressing himself to this man they called Miser—"all we hope is that you've got a good pile, if owning it makes you happy."

"Yes, I'm rich," the man answered with a ring of triumph in his voice.

He was a tall man, with a sunburnt worn face, a long brown beard that hid the mouth and chin, and a pair of clear blue eyes that gazed fearlessly from under a forehead looking oddly white when contrasted with the bronzed tint of cheeks and throat. "Yes, I'm rich, though not altogether since I joined you. I had years and years of slaving and saving before I met any of you—years and years. I've been ten years in the colony, and though I had barely a pound in the world when I landed, I own now nearly ten thousand pounds."

Several of the men sighed involuntarily. "Not that ten thousand pounds is wealth as the rich reckon," he went on, "but in England it will give a man the decencies of life."

"Then you are going back?"

"Yes, I am going back."

"Well, I'm sorry, Miser; the colony could have better spared another man."

The talk drifted into discussion of the old country, and after a time the men separated for their stretchers, to sleep through their last night together.

But Frank Erle could not sleep. Through a rift in the tent roof he caught the silver glow of one star in the Southern Cross; on the soft waves of air that swept ghostlike through the swaying curtains, came the faint and far-off barking of the dingoes; but it was not present sight or sound that kept him waking on his hard pillow, with his arms beneath his head. He was thinking of his past, of the errors he had committed, and the pains he had endured, and was wondering, if it were all to do over again, should he be wiser.

As yet he did not reproach himself for his action towards his wife, possibly because there was a germ of bitterness towards her lurking in his heart still.

Looking back on it all now, he and she seemed to him two entities that he, as a third person, judged dispassionately. He had been mad to marry her, and think his love would suffice; but when he discovered that she wanted her luxuries first and him afterwards, then he had done the best for her that remained in his power; he had left her free. Her father would take her back if he were dead; so he had said, and so she had told him. Then let them think him dead, and so let her recover the things she valued.

Such had been his attitude of mind at the first; later, when it occurred to him that silence might be cruel, he had nothing cheering to tell, nothing but privations to endure, scarcely anything to hope for or promise, and before the good days dawned silence had grown into a habit.

But now that the goal of his ambition had been reached, now that he could offer her comfort if not luxury, now that he was about to move back to the life he had left, now he realised with a dull sense of wonder how changed, and old, and indifferent he had grown. His beard was streaked with grey, and it seemed to him that every feeling he possessed had aged too. Why his boy, if alive, must be almost eleven years old, and his wife would be five-and-thirty.

For a moment he wondered if it would not be wiser to let the dead past lie undisturbed, to live his own life in his own way, and not cast his shadow across her luxurious present. He did not believe he loved her now, and if not, then what was the good of returning, simply to shoulder his burden of abandoned pain? For a moment he held the balance of his future in his hand, and dallied with it. To live on the solitary life that had grown natural and almost dear, or to return to the shocks and uncertainties of a life he did not desire. One course seemed almost as right as the other now.

On which side then was inclination? Was the present life satisfying or desirable? On that point he did not delude himself for an instant. His colonial enterprise had been merely a means to the end of growing rich, and now that he was, not rich, but comfortably independent, it must terminate. That his heart yearned for the old domestic ties, he could not say. They had been severed in pain and bitterness, and all that he had found so fair in them he ascribed to his own delusions; but such as the past had been, it was the best past

he knew, and curiosity regarding those who had been its centres he believed to be now his keenest remaining instinct. To see Hyacinth again, to know if she was happy among the personal comforts that, in her mind, alone made life tolerable, to learn how she had trained his boy, and if she cherished any memory of him—the father; to discover all this, himself remaining undiscovered, if possible, that was the course that seemed wise and desirable to this middle-aged, changed, and hardened Francis Erle.

"No, sir, Mr. Craig don't live 'ere; we live 'ere."

"And who are you?"

"We are Lord Barrenmoor and family."

"But Mr. Craig used to live here."

Frank Erle did not look like a gentleman as the footman reckoned gentlemen, and so he had to hold the door almost forcibly ajar while waiting for his answer.

"That may be, but Lord Barrenmoor has been 'ere ever since I came to 'im two years ago."

Frank Erle went down the steps slowly. He had been now two days in London, during which he had hunted in vain for tidings of Hyacinth. His first visit had been to the street they used to inhabit, but the small houses had made room for a row of middle-class shops, and of course not a trace of her remained there. Then he had endeavoured to discover her father's place of business, but, although it was as well known to the initiated as the Bank of England, Frank's acquaintance with his father-in-law had been too limited to teach him that the trade had been founded by Mr. Craig's grandfather-in-law, and still carried on business under the original name. When he learned later that Mr. Craig's dwelling-house had a new inhabitant, he went down the steps into the street with a sudden sense of being himself lost to name and place, and existence even.

Frank Erle had not wished himself remembered; in bitterness of heart he had told himself that it would be better for him and everyone that he should be forgotten. Even on the way home he had been doubtful if he should ever announce himself or claim his old place and associations; but now, when the door to restoration seemed barred against him, he experienced a curious thrill of anguish and dismay.

He did not know where he was going, though he knew he was advancing some-

where, with the sunshine in his eyes, and the pedestrians staring with indifferent curiosity at his long beard and badly-fitting colonial clothing. It was an hour after when he seated himself wearily beneath a tree in the park. Some children playing near spoke to each other in whispers of the old gentleman on the bench. That gave him another curious thrill. Was that how his own boy, his Frankie, would regard him if they met again?

His attitude of mind had entirely altered in the last few hours; to find his wife and child had now become imperative, essential. But how, where?

It was rather an instinct than a hope that induced him to drive back to the street in which he had spent his brief married life. Perhaps some face passing in the crowd would seem familiar; perhaps someone could give him a clue.

On the site of the little lodging-house, where he and Hyacinth had been so happy, before rough surroundings had fretted the edge off her tenderness, a greengrocer's shop now exposed its variety of fruits and vegetables, and a buxom young woman was knitting busily. Frank Erle had passed the shop half-a-dozen times hesitatingly, and it was more because he felt that the young woman was regarding him curiously than from other conscious motive that he entered.

"I came here to-day to look for a friend who used to live here," he said, after a few preliminaries, "but the street has been so altered that I find myself quite lost."

The young woman looked up at him with the brightest interest.

"Was the friend a Mrs. Erle?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Well now, that is the oddest thing. We had not been settled here a week when a young lady called, though that's a year ago now. She gave me a sovereign and an address, and told me that if ever a gentleman called here to ask about a Mrs. Erle I was to say she was living with her father and son at Parkmount Mottley, and if the gentleman never called and we were leaving here I was to send her word, so that she could give the same directions to the next people. Father said it was all such nonsense, though he bid me keep the sovereign. I'm glad now I've earned it, for I suppose you are the gentleman."

"Was the lady fair, with blue eyes?" Frank asked eagerly.

"No, tall and dark, and grand, like a queen."

The man sighed. "Well, you've executed your commission very kindly at any rate, and here is another sovereign to add to the first."

That Frank Erle was alive and would come back was an article of faith with Julia Ryder.

In the heiress's heart there was a small passion for dramatic effect. To have drifted towards her object in a humdrum way would have deprived possession of half its charm. To have gone to Mr. Craig and to have said, "Your daughter is starving in a garret, on what she can earn by her needle, and I hope you will see your way to help her, or at least in simple justice to allow her the money that was her mother's," would not have appealed to Miss Ryder at all; but to dress Frankie in plain, well-fitting clothing that made him look like a little prince, and to take him herself to Mr. Craig's office, that she might there solicit his vote and interest to place the fatherless child in a home for destitute boys, this afforded Miss Ryder the most interesting morning's work she had ever performed.

Mr. Craig had been a little impatient of the heiress's errand, for his patronage of the "home" was a bore, often involving him in visits from philanthropic females, but when he saw the child his interest was aroused in spite of himself.

"He does not look much like a needy orphan," he said good-naturedly, "but I suppose he is one since you say it."

"His mother earns nine shillings a week on an average, and lives in a garret in Bowdler's Rents."

"Well, nine shillings is not a large income."

"No, particularly when the woman is a lady by birth and education."

Mr. Craig shrugged his shoulders. This suggestion did not interest him.

"I shall remember the child when a vacancy occurs at the home. What name did you say?"

"Francis Erle; the mother's name Hyacinth Erle, widow."

Mr. Craig uttered a cry like that of a wounded animal. "Do you know—do you know that she is my daughter?" he cried.

"Yes, but I hope you will not refuse your vote to the child on that account," Miss Ryder answered demurely.

The rich man drove to Bowdler's Rents

with the heiress, and Frankie sat on the seat opposite him, staring with round limpid eyes at "grandpapa," and when the door of Hyacinth's miserable apartment was opened to them, the old man and the child entered hand in hand.

"You must come home with me," Mr. Craig said, with tears in his eyes. "I have never had a happy day since we parted."

Hyacinth sighed. To give up her poor little garret would give her a pang. Luxury had no longer any allurements for her, nor ease any charm; nevertheless, since her father wished it, for Frankie's sake and his she acquiesced.

"Why don't you wish to ride with me to-day, Frankie?"

Frankie looked up at his mother as she stood, in her dark blue habit and tall hat, buttoning her gloves, and blushed a little.

He was a handsome fellow of between eleven and twelve now, with her clear eyes and his father's fine forehead and firm sweet mouth. The years that had elapsed since he quitted London for Parkmount had developed him from a child into a well-grown boy, while to his mother they had restored much of her past youth and beauty. As she stood before him, fair and slim in her perfectly-fitting dress, she looked no more than her thirty-six years. True, her tints had lost the brightness of girlhood, and there were faint hollows in her smooth cheeks, faint lines carved by pain about lips and eyes; but no one who knew and loved the face now would have exchanged its patient sweetness and mature beauty for the freshest charm of girlhood.

"I thought you were so fond of your pony," Mrs. Erle went on.

"I like him very well, but there is something else I like better now," Frankie answered after a little hesitation.

"And what is that, dear?" The mother was a little disappointed. It was for Frankie's sake she had endeavoured to renew her old love of the saddle, and since riding meant being with her when lessons were over, she heard Frankie's answer with a little shadow of pain.

"It is a man, a gentleman; he is stopping at the hotel in the village. Mr. Frazer knows him and likes him, he is quite wonderful. He has been to Australia, has lived in the bush, and dug for gold, and has such stories about kangaroos and opossums and black fellows."

"And where did you meet him?" Mrs.

Erle had sat down, and was drawing off her gloves again, and Julia Ryder, who had been reading the morning paper by the window, laid her paper on her knee and looked up with glistening eyes.

"I don't really know," Frankie answered with the distress of a child suddenly catechised about an everyday occurrence. "I think the first time was when Mr. Frazer and I were fishing, and he came up and helped me to throw my line. Mr. Frazer liked him, and we went to his rooms, and he showed us some gold nuggets, and a rug made from skins of opossums that he had shot himself. I have seen him a good many times since. On those wet days when I went out alone he met me, and to-day he said if Mr. Frazer would let me leave off lessons early I could go for him, and we should have a splendid walk together."

"But, dear Frankie, I don't know that you ought to go with a stranger like that," Mrs. Erle said gently. "He may not be a gentleman."

"Oh, but he is a gentleman," Frankie answered with conviction. "I know he is, and Mr. Frazer says it too."

"Does he know who you are?" Julia asked carelessly.

"Of course he does; all the village knows who I am," with a child's unconscious pomposity.

"I must see Mr. Frazer and ask about this," Mrs. Erle said, moving towards the bell. But Julia intercepted her. "Don't make a molly-coddle of the child; he's not a girl, to be followed with a veil and parasol. Go for your ride like a dear creature, and I shall accompany Frankie to interview this ogre."

Miss Ryder's heart was palpitating to positive pain as she took her way with Frankie through the park towards the village. The chances were a hundred to one that this stranger was not Francis Erle, and yet it might be he, and the mere thought set all the heiress's steady pulses throbbing.

The village of Mottley was by no means an important spot, nor one likely to attract tourists by its own charms. It consisted of such a cluster of houses as often lies on the border of a gentleman's demesne, and provides him and his household with conveniences to its own advantage. Before Parkmount had passed into Mr. Craig's hands, its outdoor servants had found residences at Mottley; its small drapers' shops had been patronised by the lady's-maid,

and its bar-room by the grooms and stable boys; but since Mr. Craig's advent the village had suffered commercially a good deal, and only that Mrs. Erle's bounty to the aged and helpless among the villagers more than compensated for other deprivations, there might have been some harmless grumbling in the matter of the new resident at the big house.

It had been Hyacinth's desire for a country home that led Mr. Craig to this purchase, and since Mottley was sufficiently close to London to permit a daily visit thither, he rather enjoyed the change. It was good for rich men to have a country house he knew, and Frankie, growing up at Parkmount, would have a position among county people such as no City wealth could procure him.

Frankie was the darling of Mr. Craig's old age—a darling that in all love and devotion he did his best to spoil; but the mother's watchfulness and the boy's own naturally sweet and generous nature had saved him hitherto. "You must grow up a man like your father," had been his mother's watchword to him, and unconsciously that thought dwelt with him nearly always. Possibly Frank Erle did not deserve the place he held in the hearts of his wife and son, but very few of us find the exact niche that suits our deserts, and stand either higher or lower than our merits with most who know us.

The hotel whither Frankie directed his steps was an inn of a homely and rural description, but in a little place like Mottley big names become essential, and so the "Red Lion" was a hotel that satisfied the inhabitants, and passed muster with chance travellers.

"Are you to ask for the gentleman?" Miss Ryder inquired as they approached the door.

"Yes, but"—with puzzled consciousness stealing over his face, "I don't know his name."

But the attendant knew very well what gentleman Frankie wanted, and took up the message that Master Erle and a lady were waiting at the door.

And by-and-by Julia Ryder heard the oddest footsteps descending the oil-clothed stairs, a step that had in it feverish eagerness and tremulous reluctance, the mingled tread of youth and age.

"It is he," the heiress said to herself, while the throbbing of her heart nearly suffocated her; and when the footsteps

reached the door and she turned round, it was not at Frankie the stranger looked, but at her, while surprise, relief, and disappointment chased each other over his sun-browned face.

"Possibly I shall make an unwelcome third at your interview," the heiress said brightly, "but Mrs. Erle wished me to see Frankie's friend. You must excuse a widow's anxiety about her one treasure."

The man winced, and she saw it, but his natural colour was slowly welling up into his cheeks again. He muttered something about regret, short acquaintance, liberty, etc., which Miss Ryder good-naturedly interrupted. Mrs. Erle would be very glad to make his acquaintance she knew, and he must take an early opportunity of visiting her at home. "She is the sweetest woman in the world," Julia said, with a burst of enthusiasm that would have been impossible but for her certainty of the identity of the man before her, "but if she were not the sweetest woman in the world discipline would be of no avail," and then, as they walked back through the Parkmount woods, while Frankie found a hundred objects of interest to take him hither and thither, birds' nests in the alder bushes, hyacinths—"mother's flowers"—in the long grass, Julia Ryder told Frank Erle all she knew of his wife, of her passionate repentance and terrible atonement for the wrongs she thought she had done him, of the absolute destitution in which she had willingly lived for years and years, while luxury waited for her with extended hands. And then she touched lightly on her own part in reuniting Mr. Craig and his daughter, and wound up by saying she thought Frank Erle lived, and had therefore done her best to leave landmarks by which he could trace his wife.

"Then it was you who gave a sovereign to the greengrocer's girl?" Frank asked huskily.

"Yes."

He stooped and kissed her gloved hand; but he neither thanked her verbally nor declared himself then.

Mrs. Erle had meantime returned from her ride, and finding Julia and Frankie still absent had gone out to meet them. The woods about the house were private, and so she went on foot with her habit gathered into her hand. She had taken off her hat, and the waning sunshine played on her uncovered hair, and with the flush of recent exercise on her cheeks, and a

smile born of the sweetness of the sunset hour on her lips, it was the girl love of Frank Erle's early days that seemed to approach him in dreamy, unconscious grace.

She was still a good way off when Frankie saw her, and set up a shout, and rushed towards her; but she repelled a little the caresses he would have lavished on her, not deeming them decorous in presence of the stranger of whom he had made a friend.

The boy had taken her arm, and she was looking down at him and talking to him, but with the consciousness of a strange presence near her flushing her face a little. She had gone over it all in her own mind as he neared her—how Julia would introduce him, and how she would thank him for his kindness to her son; but somehow Julia did not speak, though she was quite close to her, even fell back a little and left the stranger standing alone. Then she looked up into his face for the first time, and with a cry of "Frank! Frank!" that none who heard it ever forgot, fell into his arms.

If space permitted it would be interesting to tell how Frank Erle and his wife fell in love with each other all over again, and with added tenderness in each because of the pain the other had seen; how Frank wished to take his wife and child away from Parkmount and establish them in their own home; and how Mr. Craig said that Hyacinth might go and leave him alone in his old age if she had sufficiently little heart, but that Frankie was his heir and should remain with him; and how Frank, looking on the old man's worn face, had remembered that forgiveness is nobler than revenge, and pardon manlier than pride.

If a few friends of Hyacinth Erle are grateful to Julia Ryder for the part she played in the heroine's story, perhaps they will be glad to know that four years later her own story ended with a sound of wedding bells. The individual at the wedding who created almost as much interest in the hearts of the public as the bride herself was Julia Erle, the three-year-old bridesmaid. If this young lady's parents added anxiety regarding her deportment to their interest in the auspicious ceremony, it was only because they underrated her ability to acquit herself like the daughter of "the most charming married couple in the county."

THE EPILOGUE.

"How silly I was in those days!" said a handsome woman, beautifully dressed, her costly toilettes bearing a tender meaning not understood by the world—they being inspired, not by the love of dress and show, as one in a long-past youth, but by the special desire of her husband. While to both of them, though, perhaps, in different fashions, these dainty signs of a wealthy life, were the chastened recollections of an old bitterness dead.

Twenty years make a considerable difference to a woman's appearance, as she finds to her cost, and Hyacinth Erle was twenty years older this spring afternoon than she was that day, when she and four other girls had promised to come back to the woods and tell each other what answer Life had given to their questions. But, after all, it is something to find out that you were silly, when the finding out means what it did to Hyacinth. And so she thought as she made her way through the woods which their light, careless feet, had trodden as girls—careless feet which had learned to go softly as the years marked the solemn measure of time.

"I had to go through the darkness to learn to understand the light," she said to her husband, when she told him of her project, and he had suggested that the others' lives would probably be too full of babies, or cares, or pleasures by this time to remember a girlish freak of fancy. "I must go and tell them how foolish I was then, and in the days that followed."

And he had laughed a little, and kissed her, and let her go.

Hyacinth Erle, as she passed through the wood, wondered if her old companions would recognise her. She had lost sight of them all for years.

As she neared the trysting-place, she began to feel nervous, with an excitement which was half pain.

"I hope they have not forgotten," said Hyacinth; "it will be lonely if they are not there."

But, as stepping slowly, half afraid in her excitement, she came up to the old grey wall, she saw that she was not the only one who had remembered.

Three other women were standing with their backs to her, looking at the wall, as they had done that first afternoon long ago. They were laughing a little as they talked together. Then one of them turned.

"Ah, there!" she cried. "I knew she would come!"

The next second she had hurried across the mossy turf and caught Hyacinth's outstretched hand, while the other two followed her.

It was May Freeling—May Conolly now.

"I knew you would come," she said in her old quick fashion. "The others were beginning to doubt. Do you recognise them? Violet—not Damer any longer—Violet Guildford; I have not seen her for years till a few minutes ago, but I should have known her anywhere. She has not altered a bit. But Daisy Dunstan, the genius, and myself—I think we have altered a little. And you, Hyacinth—we shall be jealous. Don't you think she has really grown handsomer?" And May fell back, looking at her with laughing eyes as she exchanged greetings with the others.

"She has got something new to tell us," said Daisy, smiling contentedly enough, though there were lines and signs of anxious thought on her patient face, which the others did not possess.

She was not handsomely dressed, either, as they were. Her lines were cast in a different place. But Daisy had grown into a strong, sweet woman, whose life could no more fret itself for trifles.

"Yes," said Hyacinth, "I used to be like a child tossing a handful of dust in the air against the sunlight. I played at making clouds. Then one day the clouds came in earnest, and when they passed away, I was too glad to see how brightly the sun shone to make clouds any more."

"How silly we were!" said Daisy, with fine self-contempt, which had a touch of pain in it. "I think most of us made clouds in some fashion, either for ourselves or for others. Do you remember what Cecil Linton said that first afternoon when we came to gather the daffodils, when a rabbit ran across our path, and Sir Charles Danvers threw his basket after it? He said the rabbit was only hurrying along to see why the world was full of sunshine, and that it was a shame to shut out the sunshine from its view."

"There was a good deal more in that young man than we thought, I fancy," said May Conolly decidedly; "and while we imagined that he was only thinking of his own superior attractions, I believe he was looking round for the sunshine. I fancy if it were shut out from his view it was not he who made the clouds."

"There is someone else, of whom the

same may be said, I think," said Daisy, looking at Violet; "I think you two were the wise ones after all!"

Violet flushed and laughed.

"Life has been pleasant to me," she said. "I had no need to make clouds."

"No," said Hyacinth a little sadly. "You were stronger than we were, even that day when we made our compact. If it had not been for you, we should not have come. But where is Narcisse Laurent? Will she not come after all?"

The three looked at her.

"Don't you know?" May said gravely. "She is dead. She died nearly fourteen years ago. People said she killed herself with too much amusement."

"Some say that she died of disappointment," said Daisy; "her married life was so unhappy. Sir Charles neglected her dreadfully."

"I don't think it could have been that altogether," said Violet pityingly; "for she had her child to live for. I think there was something more that the world never knew."

So they had to sit down there in the sunlit wood, and tell their life-stories without Narcisse. And as they sat together, talking in lowered voices, it seemed as if the only thing that had not changed was the wood.

"If only experience came to us before youth and beauty left us," said Daisy, "how different our lives would be!"

And a vague, troubled pain came back to her eyes—a sacrifice offered to the days when there had been lovers and love, and she had hastened in her bitterness to bind herself with chains which the years could not break.

"Yes," said May, thinking of the lover whom she had wounded in her fair youth, and to whom now she had but the end of life to give.

And even Violet, gazing wistfully at the spring freshness of new green leaves, remembered ten long years lived apart from love.

"All things must change," said Hyacinth. "Perhaps that is the real punishment for our mistakes. If we live to find them out, we grow old."

Then the door in the wall was pushed open, and through it there stepped out into the wood, a girl, startling a faint exclamation from the other women's lips.

She carried her hat in her hand, and the

sunlight fell on the glory of her hair, and lighted up the grave grey eyes. There was a knot of narcissus-flowers at her throat, and another large cluster in her hand.

She looked at them half shyly but with questioning earnestness, while they looked at her, too startled to speak, for it seemed as if they saw in her, their own lost youth.

It was Narcisse Laurent as she had stood before them that first spring-day twenty years ago!

Then the eager questioning died out of her eyes, and she came quickly towards them.

"Mother sent me," she said with reverent gravity. "She could not come herself. She is dead, you know. But to-day a letter was given me, which she wrote before she died; and when I opened it, I found in it a message which I was to bring you this afternoon. She said that long ago, she could not say it herself, but that to-day she says it through me. And this is what she would have said to you if she had been able to come back and speak herself. The night is only waiting for the day, and darkness is but a renewing, and we are foolish to despair. For we have but to take in our hand the golden branch of patience, and with it pass back into the sunshine and light once more."

Then the women took her by the hand, and kissed her as women kiss the child of a dear friend dead. And there were tears in their eyes, too, but they were the tears of tenderness and reverent thankfulness; for the shadow had passed from them, and foolish regrets blinded their eyes no more, for the message had gone straight to their hearts, grown wiser by the waiting.

So they went back through the woods once more, leaving there for ever this last tender thought of their girlhood.

And the girl, standing only at the beginning of these paths, looked after them with grave eyes, pondering over her dead mother's words.

But they seemed so old to her, these friends of her mother's, and their youth, which had appeared so near to them in the spring woods, looked so far off to her eyes, which had not yet seen eighteen springs, that they did not interest her for very long; and she straightway fell to dreaming her own dreams, as she turned back once more to the narcissus-flowers, which bloomed as luxuriantly to-day for her as they had done for the other girls that day twenty years ago.

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